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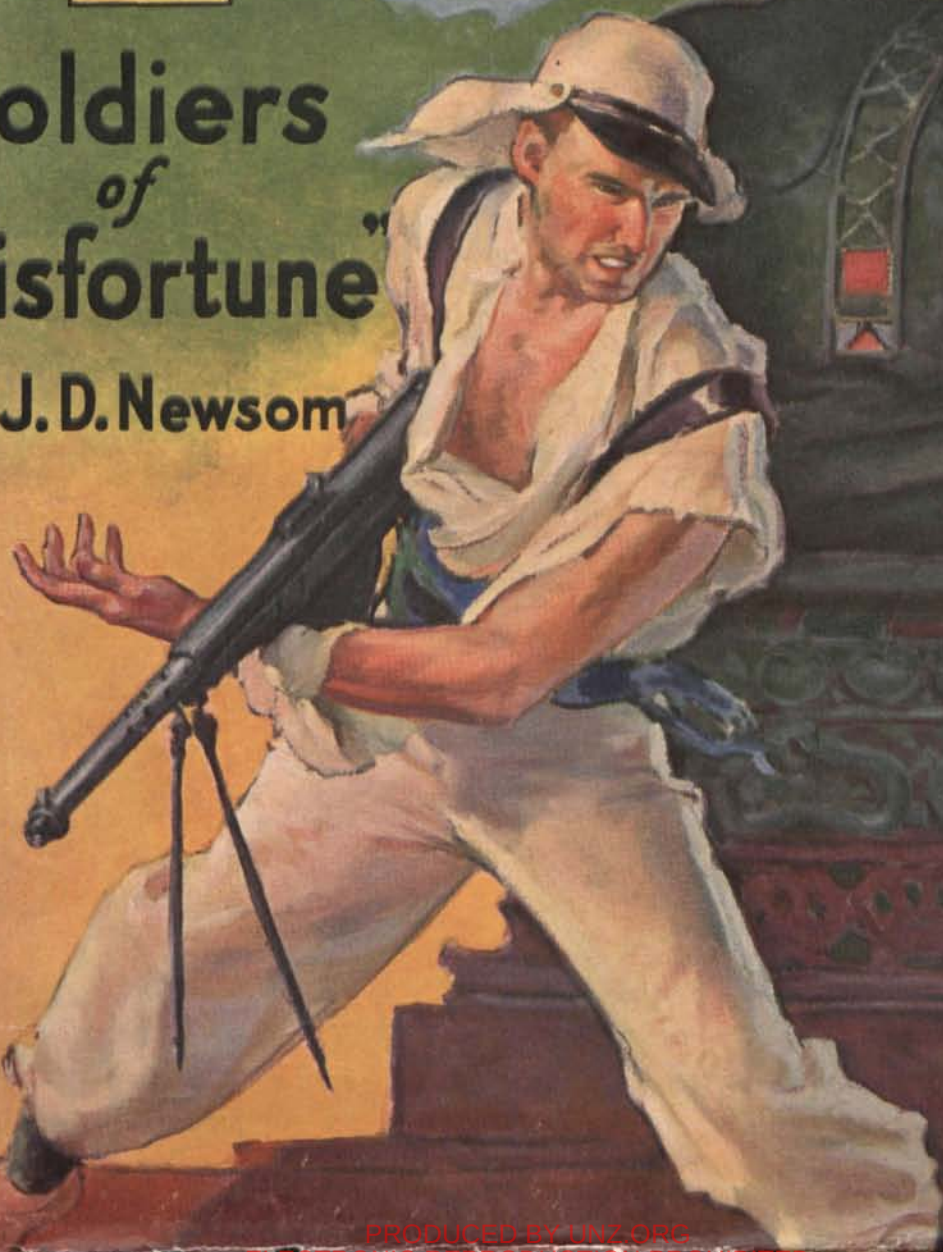
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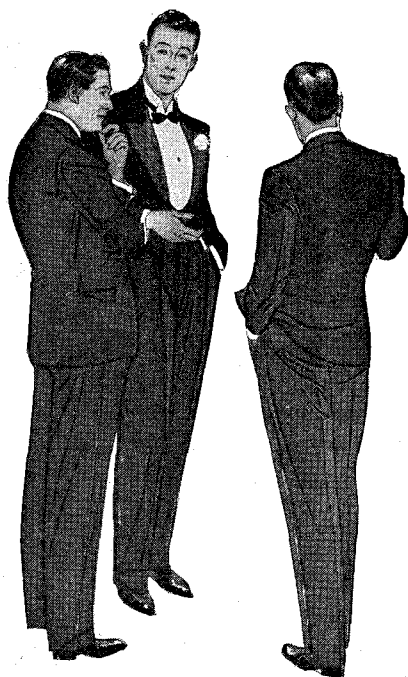
WEEKLY

THE REAL LEGION —

“Soldiers
of
Misfortune”

by J. D. Newsom





MEN

Women Despise

THERE are a half-dozen of them in every large office. If your luck's bad you often draw one as a partner at the bridge table. In movie theatres they sit next to you—or, what is worse, back of you. In business they wonder why all too often "they can't get the order." . . .

In social life or business, there is one fault that others do not excuse. It is halitosis (bad breath). You yourself never know when you have halitosis. That's the insidious thing about it. But others do, and judge you accordingly.

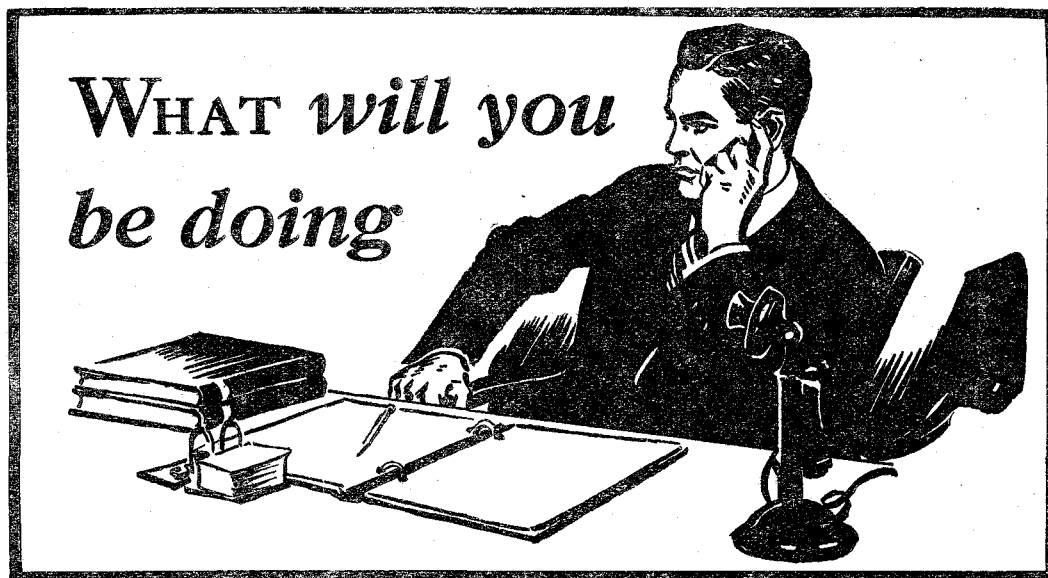
Bad breath affects everyone at some time or other. Ninety per cent of cases, says one dental authority, are caused by the fermentation of tiny food particles that the most careful tooth brushing has failed to remove. As a result, even careful, fastidious people often offend. And such offenses are unnecessary.

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Volume 256

CONTENTS FOR JUNE 1, 1935

Number 1

NOVELETTES AND SHORT STORIES

Soldiers of Misfortune (Long Novelette)	J. D. Newsom	6
<i>A Legionnaire tries to quit—and can't</i>		
Easy Gold (Short Story)	Douglas Leach	83
<i>Two crooks too smart—even for themselves</i>		
Blackout (Novelette)	Judson P. Philips	93
<i>A race with horses—and time</i>		
Men of Daring (True Story in Pictures)	Stookie Allen	108
<i>Harry Houdini, handcuff king</i>		
Aggie B., Which Ran the Wrong Way (Short Story)	C. C. Rice	126
<i>The story of a "six-horse parlay"</i>		

SERIALS

Heading Boss (Three Parts—Part I)	Borden Chase	58
<i>Tunneling under a South American river</i>		
Sink of Iniquity (Six Parts—Part II)	Hulbert Footner	110
<i>When a man lives for revenge</i>		
War Declared! (Seven Parts—Part VI)	Theodore Roscoe	131
<i>The great European conflict of 1936</i>		

OTHER FEATURES

Wonders of the World—No. 22	Alfred George	57
<i>"The matchless fortress palace at Granada"</i>		
The Deadliest Hour	Delos White	56
Animal Bums	J. W. Holden	92
Queer Plants and Animals	Carl C. Mellor	125
Argonotes		143
Looking Ahead!		144

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MESSAGERIES HACHETTE

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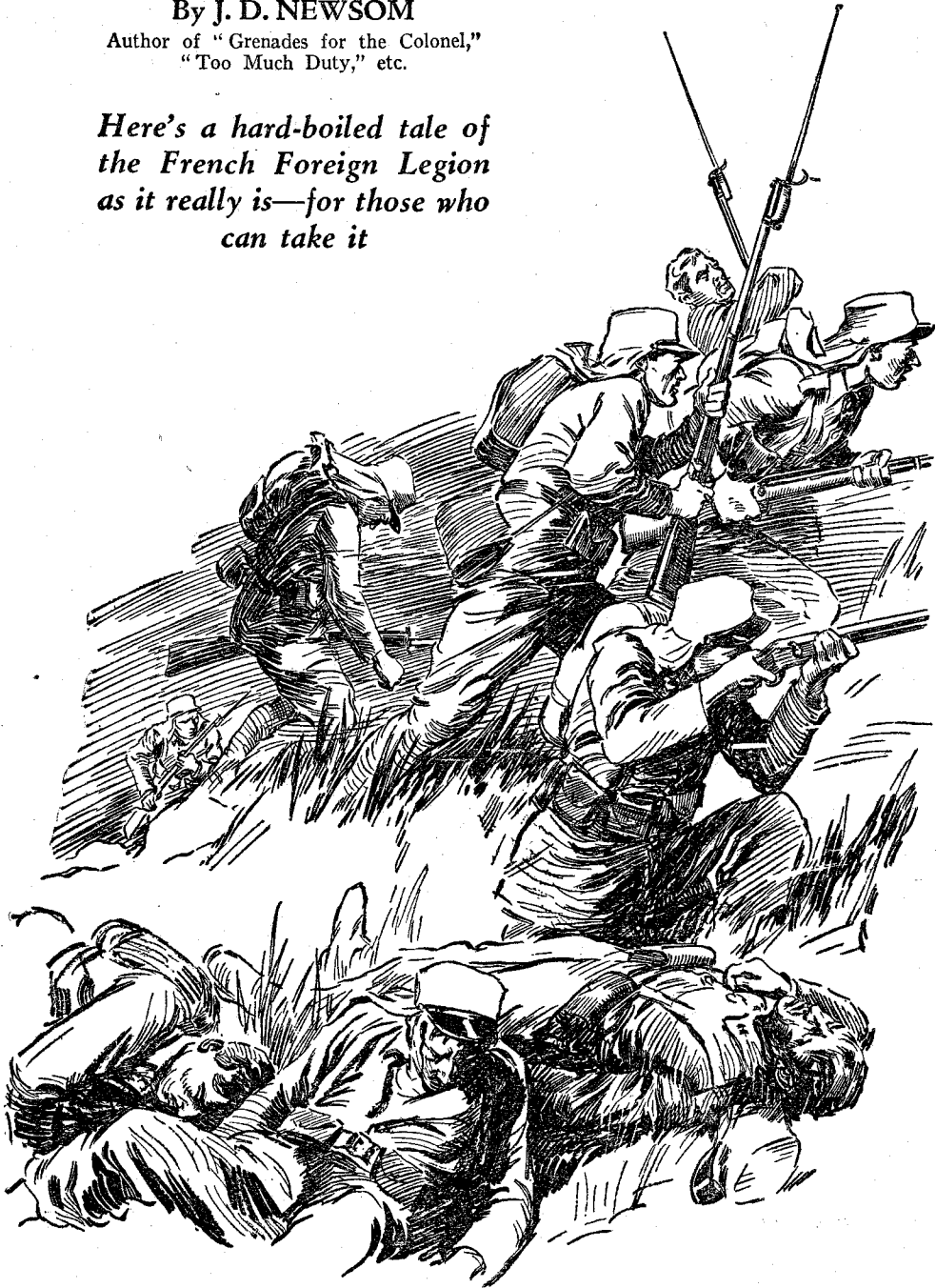
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By J. D. NEWSOM

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*Here's a hard-boiled tale of
the French Foreign Legion
as it really is—for those who
can take it*



Long Novelette



A great shout burst from the Legionnaires' lips

CHAPTER I.

CRAZY AMERICAN.

BALAI," explained Sergeant Grunovski, holding out a dilapidated bass broom. "*T'es de corvée de quartier, entends-tu, espèce de crétin. Balaye-moi la cour!*"*

* "Broom. You're on fatigue duty, do you hear, you dumb-bell? Sweep the courtyard!"

Legionnaire Kirby Norton surveyed the broom and the sergeant with a grave and thoughtful eye.

"Right smart looking weapon," he nodded, speaking in English. "You oughtn't to shake it that way, Horse Face. It's an antique. All them beautiful bristles are going to fall out if you ain't careful."

He made no attempt whatsoever to

take the broom out of the sergeant's hands.

Grunovski was not a patient man, but he controlled his temper with a superhuman effort which was painful and startling to behold. His eyes bulged, a network of purple veins stood out on his forehead, and his lips twitched and jerked as though he were about to have hysterics.

For the past five minutes he had been endeavoring to make this accursed recruit comprehend that he must take the broom and use it to sweep the barrack yard. Unfortunately, although he was an accomplished linguist with a fluent command of French, Polish, German, Ukrainian and Arabic, he could make no impression whatsoever upon Norton.

Norton was a problem. He had been at the Sidi-bel-Abbes training depot of the French Foreign Legion exactly nine days. During the first forty-eight hours either he had understood enough French to scrape by, or else in the first rush and confusion which always attended the arrival of a batch of recruits his blank ignorance of the French language had passed unnoticed.

It became glaringly conspicuous, however, on the morning of the third day when a drill instructor had taken the awkward squad in hand and had given it its first intensive workout.

They don't pamper their men in the Legion. Out of the weedy undernourished, gin-sodden creatures who come slouching into the depot, they have to make—and they do make—healthy, upstanding fighting men capable of marching forty kilometers a day in a tropical climate with sixty-odd pounds of kit sawing at the shoulder blades. It is no easy task. Mind and body have to be conditioned simultaneously and at top speed. Stamina, the will to

endure, must be crammed into resentful brains even while flabby muscles are being made strong and tough. It is not done by kindness. The drill-instructors are picked men, chosen for their ability to put the fear of God into obstreperous recruits drawn from all the gutters and slums and miseries of Europe. The one thing these outcasts and derelicts understand is discipline. They get just that.

At first, while the squad marched, countermarched and double-marched, Norton followed the crowd without too much effort, but as the morning wore on and the white-hot sun blazed down upon the exercise ground, his powers of understanding faded out slowly but completely. The instructor gave him a few personal hints in a voice like the blast of a ship's foghorn, but Norton was impervious to mere noise. He listened attentively, with a puzzled, cheerful look on his sharp-featured countenance; then he said, "Ah, oui. We-we-we-wee!" and did the wrong thing in a brisk and clumsy manner.

The more the instructor howled at him the less he understood. Not a word could he grasp. His mind became like unto a beautiful blank. The blankest kind of a blank. A more thorough-going imbecile had never been wished upon that apoplectic instructor. Norton marked time when ordered to "about turn by numbers"; he came smartly to a halt, and threw the ranks into dreadful confusion, verging upon collective insanity, when urged in impassioned accents to advance "*au pas de gymnastique*," which is the roundabout French way of saying "double march!"

In the end, to rid himself of this baneful influence, the instructor had to admit to partial defeat. He called a

corporal and four men and told them, with tears in his voice, to lock the sacred specimen of a dirty, lousy, rat-faced American half-wit in the guard room.

NORTON did not seem to experience any sense of shame. The guard room was cool and dark. He curled up on the sleeping platform and spent the rest of the morning gently snoring, while the awkward squad, freed of his disturbing presence, made up for lost time and sweated itself to a complete standstill.

The following days had witnessed a repetition of that first clash between the overwhelming forces of discipline and obedience on the one hand, and the magnificent inertia of Recruit Kirby Norton on the other.

English is not in common usage in the Legion, for Anglo-Saxons are few and far between in its ranks. Nevertheless something had to be done about Norton. Skilled non-commissioned officers worked over him by the hour, doing their damndest to arouse some spark of understanding in his gray matter. While he stood at ease, with his hands clasped behind his back, erect and determined as a bantam rooster, the ablest, most clear-spoken sergeant on the depot staff repeated the same order over and over again, and a fully trained Legionnaire carried out these orders with scrupulous precision. And they got nowhere.

Norton's mind was not only a blank, it was a sieve. Two consecutive orders were more than he could begin to memorize. With snappy determination he would run off in the wrong direction, or else he stood stock still, staring at his mentor with a questioning look in his eyes, shaking his head slow-

ly from side to side as he sighed: "Gosh, I wish I could get the hang of this *parlez-vous*! All this cultured stuff goes right over my head. Boy, it breaks my heart to see you all lathered up on a hot day like this."

But he had a retentive ear for music. The notes of the mess call held no secrets for him. He mastered them almost at once, which aroused the suspicions of an observant corporal and caused Norton to be marched before an officer who sat in judgment in a small, whitewashed room decorated with fly-specked memoranda and a plaster cast bust of a buxom damsel symbolizing the French republic, on whose nose and cheek bones layers of dust had been accumulating for many years. Three clerks, scribbling furiously, bent over a long table against the wall.

The officer, a tall, angular gentleman with patent leather hair and a close-cropped mustache, examined Norton with unfeigned curiosity.

"Norton," he remarked at last, speaking slow and labored English, "what is it that is then the matter with you?"

Norton's eyes flew wide open and an expression of glad surprise brightened his countenance.

"The matter with me, sir?" he echoed. "Not a thing! I'm certainly glad to meet somebody who can speak my own language."

"Quite so," agreed the officer, placing the tips of his fingers together as if he were about to pray; "but are you making an effort to understand what is said to you? I am informed that you do not try to obey orders."

"Me!" exclaimed Norton. "Why, say, I just can't learn fast enough. If they talked slower I could get the hang of what they're saying. You know

what it is, you can't learn a foreign language in five days. I can't, anyway."

THE officer swallowed hard. Such friendliness on the part of a recruit was positively unseemly.

"Kindly recall that you are addressing your superior officer," he snapped. "Remember your distances, if you please!" Much to his exasperation he thought he detected a twinkle in the depths of Norton's eyes, and he added sharply, "If you do not speak French, how did you do to enlist?"

"Nothing to it," grinned Norton. "The fellow in the recruiting office in Marseilles spoke fine English. He was a swell guy. He said—"

The officer did not give a curse what anybody had said.

"Enough!" he broke in. "Be silent! Norton, you are now a Legionnaire. Others have had to learn. You must learn in the same fashion. We have no room for exceptions here. No! We cannot immobilize the entire staff for you to make the joke of!"

"No, sir!" protested Norton. "You're wrong there."

The officer did not believe him.

"You will learn," he summed up, "as you proceed. This ignorance you manifest is a pretense. Very well, my friend, you will understand or be punished. The orders are easily remembered—even by fools. And to begin with you will do two days of extra drill to teach you the proper respect due to an officer. That is all. *Dis- posez!*"

Even this warning, however, had failed to heighten Norton's receptiveness to new ideas. It required the patience of Job to make him grasp the most elementary suggestions, and Sergeant Grunovski was far from Joblike.

At the end of five minutes of strenuous effort he was almost frothing at the mouth. The men on guard duty, sprawling on the bench by the postern gate, were having the time of their lives at his expense, and he realized that unless he could overcome Norton's amiable imbecility without delay his prestige would suffer irreparable damage.

"Observe," he shouted at Norton, "and observe me carefully, thou monstrous quintessence of congenital idiocy, and if you do not obey instantly, it is not to the guard room you will go! No—not this time! It is to a cell, and you will stay there, by God, until you have memorized the entire Larousse dictionary!"

So saying, he held a burnt match stick under Norton's nose, dropped it, and swept it, together with other bits of rubbish, into a neat, conical mound. The men on guard duty rocked from side to side, hiccupping feebly as they watched the performance. Norton, alone, remained calm and dignified. Clad in an ill-fitting fatigue uniform of coarse white canvas so large that the shoulder seams hung down midway to his elbows, with a cap a size too small squarely planted on his close-cropped nut, he followed Grunovski's demonstration with an earnest, unsmiling expression frozen on his sharp-featured countenance.

Grunovski would have loved to murder him, but there were too many witnesses. He threatened Norton with a rigid forefinger.

"You," he said. "Broom," he said. "You sweep—like this." Viciously he scraped the earth, raising clouds of dust. "Now—is it yes or no?"

Before Norton could open his mouth, the sentry posted outside the gate shouted, "*Garde à vous!* Guard

turn out!" and the next instant Colonel Auguste Baliverne strode smartly through the postern gate into the thick of the young dust storm raised by Grunovski's exertion. To add to the gayety of nations the colonel stepped into the sample rubbish heap, tripped, stumbled, and nearly, but not quite, fell flat on his face.

The guard, no longer laughing, leaped to attention, for Baliverne was in command of the training depot, and had the reputation of being the most rigid disciplinarian this side of Kingdom Come.

"What," he demanded, glaring at Grunovski, who stood chin up, chest out, heels together, holding the broom close to his side as though it were a rifle—"what happens here? Have you gone mad, sergeant? Is it that you desire me to break my neck on your damned dust heap? You, a sergeant, sweeping!"

He sputtered incoherently. "What next? Why don't you get down on all fours and scrub the doorstep while you're about it?"

HE listened in stony silence to Grunovski's stammered defense, then slowly he brought his cold blue eyes, all streaked with bright red blood vessels, to bear upon Norton. There was nothing easy-going about him. He had a long, flat chin, a beak of a nose, and a bushy gray mustache brushed straight out at right angles to his harsh and uncompromising mouth.

"So you don't speak French, hm?" he commented in almost flawless English. "Not a word, hm?"

Tucked away somewhere inside his ungainly uniform Norton squared his shoulders as he said apologetically:

"Very sorry, sir. I can't seem to get the hang of it. I try—"

"Not hard enough! You Americans you think—" He left the sentence hanging in midair, and went off on another tack. "Your sergeant is ordering you to sweep up the—ah—débris in this courtyard. Don't you understand that?"

"Is that what he wants me to do?" cried Norton. "What do you know about that? Why, of course I'll be glad to do it. I couldn't dope out—I mean, sir, I couldn't follow him."

The colonel's steely blue eyes bored straight through him.

"What did you think he meant?"

"Search me," Norton replied with childlike simplicity, and the colonel almost strangled inside his high, tight collar.

"Search you!" he ejaculated, his long jaw trembling. "Search *you*? You Americans, you are—" Again he broke off.

"Bear this in mind," he added; "you won't last long if your attitude does not improve. We do not tolerate undesirable characters here!"

"I can quite understand that," agreed Norton. "I don't seem to fit in, but—"

"But you will," Baliverne assured him grimly, "or you will end up in prison. Be silent!" he commanded, forestalling Norton, who appeared to be about to say something. "Not a word! I have heard enough. My mind is made up about you. You are like the other Americans we have had to contend with," the truth came out at last, "you are insupportable! No sense of discipline. None! You ought to be kept out of the Legion. But you are here. You will have to conform to our standards or, I warn you for the last time, you will be dealt with most severely!" He turned to Grunovski and rapped out, "Put this soldier to work.

He knows now what is expected of him. If he refuses to obey place him under arrest instantly!"

He stalked away, pounding the earth with his heels, and as he receded, the squad slowly relaxed and became human again. Grunovski was too far gone to have any more words with Norton. He placed the broom firmly against his chest, and led him to the far end of the barrack yard.

"From here," he said, indicating the north end of the administrative building directly facing them, "to there." He pointed to the south end of the building. "Sweep!"

"Ah, we-we-wee!" agreed Norton. "Watch me!"

HE set to work with such reckless energy that the bundle of venerable twigs fell off the broom handle, and Sergeant Grunovski would have torn his hair out by the roots, had he had any hair to tear.

"Pig that you are! It is not a shovel, nor yet a pick-ax you are handling. It is but a broom. *Doucement!*" He patted the air with a circular movement as though he were running his hand over a baby's head. "Gently, thou dismal baboon! Lightly! And if you take it into your foul brain to destroy government property, you will pay for it, I promise you!"

By that time Norton had succeeded in reassembling the working parts of the broom.

"Alas, poor Yorick!" he said gravely. "We'll have to nurse him along, I can see that. Now beat it, Horse Face, I seen enough of you for one morning."

So saying, he applied himself to his job with great diligence and Grunovski, exhausted by the prolonged conflict, retreated toward the guardhouse.

He was not quite half way across the yard when Norton, enveloped in a swirl of dust, burst into song:

"Oh! I yam lost in the for . . . rest!
'Tis a dark and sto . . . ormy night,
trala!

Oh, I would give a million bucks
To be out in the open again!"

The tune bore a faint resemblance to the celebrated "Prisoner's Song," but it was less a song than a plaintive, full-throated and dreadful howl. The sound persisted as Norton, drawing upon a lively imagination, produced stanza after mournful stanza.

The sergeant, clenching his fists, took one step in Norton's direction, then he changed his mind and hurried as fast as he could walk without loss of dignity toward the guardhouse.

"I can't go back," he told Corporal Schmorel. "I couldn't keep my hands off his neck. I know it. I'd murder him. Just wait till the Old Man hears him! He'll blow up, and how I hope and pray he does! I've been in the Legion going on eleven years, Schmorel, but never—never, do you hear me—have I had to deal with a thing like that."

The corporal tugged at his mustache, which was long and of a blond hue.

"He won't last long, sergeant, that is one consolation," he said gravely. "I think he's crazy, if you want my opinion."

CHAPTER II.

A NEW FRIEND.

DESPITE the heat, the dust, and the threat of reprisals hanging over his head like a sword of Damocles, Norton was still going

strong when he was mildly startled to hear a voice say:

"Cheerio, old chap!"

He glanced over his shoulder and to right and left, but there was not a man within a hundred yards of the spot where he stood. It was seven thirty. Most of the troops were out route marching, or drilling, or learning how to shoot. Here and there a Legionnaire on fatigue duty straggled across the parade ground, keeping to the patches of translucent blue shadow thrown by the olive trees planted in long, straight rows. Five stories high, yellow walled, ugly, the barracks stood empty and silent. On the far side of the yard, by the gate, Grunovski and the picket hugged the patch of shade beneath the projecting eaves. It was August. The morning was very still and so hot that even at that early hour no one ventured out into the sunlight without good cause.

Cupping one hand to his ear, Norton muttered:

"Voices! Celestial voices! By heck, I hope I'm not going the same way as Joan of Arc!"

Then he pushed back the vizor of his cap and looked up. A few feet above him, at a window on the ground floor of the administrative building, he beheld a soldier in khaki uniform who, when their eyes met, smiled quizzically, arching one eyebrow and pursing his lips as he repeated in a glib, parrotlike manner:

"Cheerio, old chap!"

Norton paused, resting both hands on the top of the ancient and dilapidated broom.

"*Banzai!*" he said politely. "May you live a thousand years, moosoor. Do my ears deceive me or did you address me in my own, my native tongue?"

The man tucked a pencil behind his ear and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the window sill. Youngish, in his early thirties, with a high, bald forehead, a thin, pointed nose, and a



NORTON

small mouth he looked pleasant and affable, and yet, in some indefinable fashion, slippery. Even when he smiled, a shrewd, coldly appraising wariness never left his eyes.

"Are you Norton?" he inquired.

"This is fame!" grinned Norton. "What are you, a major general or something?"

"Nothing more than a private, on the clerical staff. You had better keep on sweeping. Sergeant Grunovski, I see, shows signs of impatience. But," he added, laughing gently, "do not sing. I advise you not to sing. The colonel is in his office."

"Don't you like me-ounting music?" Norton asked.

"It is beautiful but inappropriate. I introduce myself: Edmond Cordelier." He cleared his throat. "I learned English at a jolly good school at Hastings. In England, you know."

"I know," sighed Norton, making a vague swipe at a crumpled cigarette-paper packet. "Dear old England!"

What the hell are you doing in this outfit?"

AN expression of manly fortitude, tinged with poignant sorrow, swept across Cordelier's face.

"That is something I can't tell you now," he said firmly. "We must return to our tasks, but I'd likely awfully much to have a talk with you, yes?"

"O. K. by me."

"Can you leave barracks tomorrow night?"

"I guess so if I'm not in the cooler."

"The cooler? Of course, most amusing! You mean the guardhouse. Well, old chap, you must keep out of the cooler because," he leaned a little farther out of the window, "I have a surprise for you."

"Oh yeah?" A note of derision crept into Norton's voice. "Listen, I've had all the surprises I want for the rest of my natural."

"Wait! You have been in the Legion nine days? Tomorrow, old boy, you receive your enlistment bonus. Isn't that ripping?"

A puzzled frown appeared on Norton's otherwise unruffled brow.

"Bonus?" he repeated. "What bonus?"

"You receive one hundred and twenty-five francs for having enlisted. That is in addition to your pay, you understand. The voucher is here on my desk."

"I got you! Gravy. The sugar coating on the pill."

"The bitter pill," nodded Cordelier, twisting his extraordinarily flexible mouth sideways. "Yes, I know what you mean . . . and I agree. But we must make allowances, old fellow. So what do you say? Tomorrow night we have a little binge, just you and I, to celebrate?"

"Tickled to death," agreed Norton. "It's my party. Boy, it sure is good to speak da lingo again after all the trouble I've been having. Believe me, it is!"

CORDELIER refilled Norton's glass.

"An amusing place, is it not?" he observed. "I thought you would like it. It is different."

"Are you telling me," commented Norton, staring thoughtfully at his plate on which was heaped a glutinous mess of lukewarm dough optimistically referred to on the thumb-marked menu as Spaghetti à la Bolognese. A reddish substance compounded of spoiled tomatoes, garlic, and chopped goat's meat of doubtful origin had been sloshed over the *pasta*.

Cordelier shrugged one shoulder, laughed, and said:

"The food, of course, is very plain."

"Plain!" Norton broke in. "Don't kid yourself, Eddy. It's lousy. It's worse'n that; it stinks."

Cordelier laughed that one off too.

"My dear chap, you exaggerate! It's not so bad, you know. One mustn't expect too much. Don't forget that we are in Sidi-bel-Abbes, in midsummer. One can't expect the diversity one finds in France. And, really, if you only knew, this is far superior to most of the restaurants frequented by our fellow Legionnaires."

The tone of his voice and the look of smug condescension which accompanied his words implied clearly that his fellow Legionnaires, in his estimation, were mud.

Norton pushed away his plate and helped himself to a cigarette.

"Eddy," he remarked after a contemplated pause, "you're all wet. We came out to have a good time. Are we

having a good time? Like hell we are. This dump is a morgue. It's dead and, I tell you, it stinks. Let's go somewhere else. Let's make whoopee, Eddy, in a big way. Ain't there a gin mill in this one-horse town where we can step out?"

He was bored, bored to tears. The party was not going so well. In fact, it threatened at any moment to turn into a dismal flop.

They had been compelled to postpone the celebration for a week, for Norton, owing to his amazing obtuseness, had spent his nights in the guard-house and his days in the performance of menial and disgusting chores adapted, so the powers that be had decreed, to his low level of intelligence. The one drawback to this scheme had been that he could not even be trusted to do a dirty job without creating an appalling mess which some one else, in the end, had to clean up.

He was not popular. Non-commissioned officers who valued their peace of mind gave him such a wide berth that a day had come at last when he had escaped punishment simply because no one had told him to do anything, and, in consequence, he had been free to go to town with Cordelier.

They had a couple of drinks at a tenth rate café near the market place, then Cordelier had led the way to this dingy, desolate restaurant run by a Greek who was alleged to specialize in Italian dishes.

On the way over Cordelier had assured Norton that there was not a better place in town. It was quiet, it was refined, it wasn't overrun by the common herd, it had atmosphere. There, he swore, they could talk to their hearts' content without being disturbed.

Undoubtedly, they were free to talk. The hash-house was almost empty.

Two Spaniards, mechanics in greasy blue denim, sat near the door noisily shoveling unappetizing slops into their wide open mouths. In the far corner of the room a dyspeptic commercial traveler, very seedy and threadbare, sipped a glass of Vichy water. Behind the counter the Greek's wife dandled a skinny, sallow, squalling baby in one arm, while she made a pretense of rinsing glasses in a basin of gray and scummy water. The Greek, wallowing over the cash drawer, was fast asleep, his nose mashed down on an evening paper. Flies in glistening clots crawled upon the ceiling. From the near-by goods yard where freight cars were being shunted about with Gallic abandon came great crashing and banging sounds accompanied by piercing whistles.

BUT Cordelier was oblivious to his surroundings. He wanted to talk and he did so. He talked and he talked and he talked. And he drank sour red wine as though it had been good, clean water. His chief topic of conversation ever since he had picked up Norton by the barrack gate had been himself: who he was, what he was, how he had come to join the Legion.

He belonged, he assured Norton, to an excellent family, a really wonderful family. On his mother's side he was related to a senator, a cabinet minister who had held office for nineteen consecutive days.

"Is that so?" commented Norton, who had repeated those three words at least fifty times.

Nothing more was expected of him. Cordelier, warmed by the wine, had talked like a book. He had passed both baccalaureate examinations brilliantly. After that feat he had some-

how acquired the rank of reserve lieutenant in the army and had embarked upon what was to have been his life work. He was what he never tired of calling himself: a technician.

"Is that so?" muttered Norton for the fifty-first time.

It was so. And then Cordelier had spoken of the disasters which had overtaken him. On that score he was less explicit but just as long-winded. His success had aroused the envy of false friends whom he had invited to sit on the board of directors of one of his companies (he had several). They had ousted him from the chairmanship; they had faked the books, and had accused him of selling technical trade secrets to a rival concern. But he was innocent!

"Is za so?" chorused Norton, guzzling drink for drink to steel himself for the ordeal.

NEVERTHELESS, Cordelier confessed, he had been disgraced, dishonored, and hounded. His fiancée (very beautiful, very rich) had broken off their engagement. In desperation he had "flung himself" into the Legion to seek shelter until he could vindicate his good name.

But, and here his face brightened up, the officers had been quick to recognize his qualifications. He was too valuable an asset, with all his technical training, to be wasted on the parade ground, and he gave Norton to understand that he had been literally pestered to death by Colonel Baliverne until he had "accepted a position" on the clerical staff.

The arrival of the spaghetti and Norton's subsequent protests had put an end to his monologue.

"This can't be the only joint in

town," Norton insisted. "Now look, Eddy, I'm not difficult. There must be some kind of a hash-house where we could grab off a square meal. It doesn't have to be fancy. Just ham and eggs, for instance."

Cordelier threw up his slender hands and waggled them about as though fending off the idea.

"Ham, my dear fellow! Do not think of it . . . unless you desire to contract trichinosis. No, you mustn't even think of ham out here."

"O. K. by me," agreed Norton, pushing his plate farther away than ever. "Let's starve. I don't mind. But can't we go some place and do a little serious drinking?"

Cordelier grabbed the bottle and refilled their glasses brimful.

"You are right!" he cried with a sudden access of boisterous heartiness. "Let us drink! Drink and be merry! Drink—as they say in my country—is the maker of forgetfulness, is it not? This wine," he smacked his lips, "this wine is *good*."

"Good for what?" inquired Norton, making a wry face as he put down his glass. "Tanning leather?"

"Of course it is not a great wine," admitted Cordelier, "but it has a *cachet* of its own. There is not a better wine of its class in all Sidi-bel-Abbes. You can take my word for it, old fellow, and I pretend to know something about wines. This," he held up the empty bottle to the light. "is a Royal Kebir. It differs from the wines of Roussillon—"

Norton groaned aloud.

"No," he begged, "not that! I've never met a Frenchman yet who wasn't bughouse about wine! I've listened to more lectures about Bordeaux and Burgundies and what not! And honest to God, Eddy, I don't give a damn. All

I know is this stuff's as sour as vinegar. Let's go some place and—"

"I have it!" exclaimed Cordelier, snap-snap-snapping his fingers at the Greek's frowzy wife. "Two cognacs," he ordered in quick, curt French. "The best you have."

"We only have one kind," the woman said apathetically. "It's fifteen *sous* a glass."

"Never mind that! Bring what you have at once. I want you," he went on, turning to Norton, "to taste this. It is one of the best brandies I have ever come across. You will love it, I know. But tell me," he added, smiling confidentially as he leaned across the table, "I was right then. You do—er—understand some French?"

Norton was beginning to feel the effects of the startling quantities of wine he had imbibed. His brain was muzzy, and the question came so unexpectedly that for a moment he was at a loss for words.

A sheepish grin straggled across his face as he inquired:

"How did you dope that out?"

CORDELIER tapped a fingertip against his high, bald forehead.

"I knew," he laughed. "I knew all along. What you said about listening to lectures about wine—that settled it. Of course, it is none of my business, but I must say I admire your courage. You are running great risks."

"Risks nothing! They can't make me learn French. No, sir, they cannot."

But he spoke without conviction, and Cordelier, threatening him with an up-raised forefinger, said in his best, pseudo-British, man-to-man manner:

"My dear chap...come! You don't expect me to believe any such bally nonsense as that! Be honest. I won't give you away..."

Suddenly Norton's native caution deserted him. For weeks he had been under a tremendous strain. Now, however, thanks to the wine, he was overcome by a treacherous sense of release. A warm and mellow glow suffused his whole body. He saw the world through rose-tinted spectacles which masked its asperities and its pitfalls, and filled him with boundless and idiotic optimism. The restaurant looked less desolate; the lights shone brighter; Cordelier was his best and most devoted friend.

"Well," he drawled, "as a matter of fact, just between you and me and the gatepost, Eddy, I can *parlez-vous* enough to get by. Keep it under your hat because—"

He was interrupted by the Greek woman who shuffled up to the table and set before them two brandy glasses scarcely larger than good sized thimbles.

"*Non, non!*" protested Norton, airing his French for Cordelier's benefit. "Too small, *madame*. What's a humming-bird in French, Eddy? Tell her we ain't humming-birds."

"But—" began Cordelier.

"Bring a bottle," ordered Norton. "A grand, big bottle, *madame, oui-oui!*"

"It's twenty-two *francs* fifty," she informed him, unsmiling and indifferent.

From his pocket he drew a wad of notes and sorted out the right amount.

"There you are," he proclaimed. "*Voilà!* Twenty-two fifty, and an extra five for the bambino to grow on. Eddy, tell her to buy the kid some milk or a box of candy. It's only five months to Christmas."

"But," sputtered Cordelier as the woman picked up the extra five *francs* and departed without a word of

thanks, "but, really, old man, that is a lot of money to spend!"

"Don't you worry about that," chuckled Norton. "When we've spent the doggone bonus maybe I can dig up some more."

A thoughtful look crept into Cordelier's eyes. He had had a lot to drink, too, but he had been much more circumspect than Norton. He sipped where Norton guzzled, and every time he refilled the latter's empty glass he made a great show of adding a few drops to his own which, strangely enough, was never less than three-quarters full.

"Oh," he said, pursing his lips into a small, round knot. Then after a brief pause, he added with affected breeziness, "So you have a cash reserve, eh?"

"Plenty," Norton nodded. "A coupla thousand *francs* and some dollar bills. You dumb-bell, that's why I wanted to go places instead of staying here."

"And I have been trying to help you economize," exclaimed Cordelier. "How amusing!" He picked up his brandy glass and held it on a level with his eyes. "Cheerio, old man, here's to you and your success in the Legion. You will . . ."

"YOU drink to that and I'll crown you. My success in the Legion!" He snorted indignantly. "How do you get that way? What do you think I'm acting so dumb for—on the off chance they'll make me a top-sergeant? Look, Eddy," his eyes were swiveling around so that he saw Cordelier through a shimmering and uncertain haze, "before I'm through, do you know what they're going to do? They're going to kick me out."

"No!" muttered Cordelier.

"I'm telling you." He swallowed the contents of his glass at one gulp. It was so raw and fiery that it gagged him. "Hot dog!" he wheezed. "That'll put hair on your chest. Bath-tub gin has nothing on this. Ain't you drinking?"



CORDELIER

"Like a fish," swore Cordelier, holding up his glass which he had emptied on the floor. "But tell me, if you don't like the Legion—and I don't blame you, old chap—why did you enlist?"

Norton looked glum. "Have you ever been to Marseilles? You have? Then you know what it's like. Wide open! Baby doll! The ship I was on, the old Benton Brook, put in there to unload hides. I was her radio operator. Not a bad berth at that, but I went haywire in Marseilles. I don't think I drew a sober breath for a week, and the next thing I knew I was in this damned outfit!"

"Most extraordinary!" commented Cordelier.

"And how! It just happened. Some cootie I met after the Benton Brook had sailed said I ought to enlist, and, by heck, I did! That's the kind of

dumb cluck I am. Of course, I wasn't paralyzed. It was too early in the morning for that, but I'd just had an eye opener and, inside, I was as jittery as hell. All I wanted was a chance to get somewhere quiet and sober up . . . and I'll be doggoned if they didn't hook me for the next five years! Can you tie that?" he concluded helplessly.

Cordelier laughed till he cried.

"It is dreadful," he admitted. "Didn't anybody notice that you were not sober?"

"Naw," grumbled Norton, resting his cheek on his clenched fist. "How could they? I *looked* sober, and I *acted* sober, and all the time I was as boiled as an owl. Sure I was! Why, man alive, you couldn't pay me to be a soldier, least of all a French soldier! It don't make sense."

"But you enlisted."

"Maybe I did, but they're going to be so sick of the sight of me before I'm through they'll be glad to ease me out."

"Old chap," Cordelier said earnestly, "it won't work. I am your friend—I am sorry for you—and I warn you, if you keep this up you will end in just one place, and that is prison."

"Then I'll go to prison," agreed Norton. "But I won't form fours for the President of the French Republic in person. I'm a sea-going wireless operator, and if they think they can make a soldier out of me . . ."

Cordelier gnawed at his lower lip.

"There is only one thing to be done," he announced solemnly. "Norton, you must desert."

"I've thought of that, but how?"

"You must! I have heard the colonel talking about you in the office. He is having you watched. If you make one mistake he will not forgive you. Old man, you are in a terrible fix."

"They can't make me understand French!"

Cordelier shuddered. "In prison they will make you understand very rapidly. You have no choice now. You must get out. Let me think . . ."

HE thought. He took a sip of cognac and thought some more.

His thoughts made him scowl fiercely and jerk his head from side to side and drum with his knuckles on the table. At last he had it.

"I wouldn't do this for another man," he said in a low voice. "Not a single one! But I have always had a weakness for Americans, and—well, we have had a pleasant evening together, old man, and I'd like to help you."

At the other end of town, he went on in the same hushed whisper, not far from the hospital, he knew of a Syrian coffee dealer who, for a price, helped Legionnaires to desert. There were others, of course, engaged in the same clandestine business. But they were not to be trusted. The Syrian, alone, did things well. He left nothing to chance. The Syrian supplied false passports, clothes and passenger accommodations on board a foreign ship. When all was ready he summoned the Legionnaire and rushed him to Oran and onto the ship so swiftly that he was out of the country even before he was reported absent without leave.

"Swell!" crowed Norton. "Let's go!"

But Cordelier held up his hand. They would have to work, he went on, through intermediaries. The Syrian never came in personal contact with would-be deserters.

"It is very dangerous," explained Cordelier, "but I will get in touch with the right people for you. Leave every-

thing to me. In a week or so all will be ready."

Norton's face fell a mile.

"Another week!"

"Or ten days. That is not long to wait, old chap. You must be patient. Luckily, I know what to do. An Austrian who worked in the office with me deserted about a month ago. He took me into his confidence. I—er—helped him in many ways."

"Go to it," agreed Norton. "If I can only get out of this mess."

"There's just one thing," said Cordelier, clearing his throat, "it's rather expensive, you know, old man, and at present I'm rather short of cash. I wonder whether you could spare . . ." he shot a sidelong glance at Norton, "say three hundred *francs*. I hate to ask you, but . . ."

From the breast pocket of his tunic Norton drew a dilapidated billfold and counted out three one-hundred-*franc* notes which he planked down in front of Cordelier.

"There y'are, old man, old boy, old chap, old scout," he hiccupped. "Three hundred! 'N' if you need more, I got it. How much do you suppose," he inquired with an unexpected gleam of common sense, "it's going to cost—all told?"

"That," confessed Cordelier, "is more than I can tell you just now. I believe the Austrian I mentioned had to pay about a thousand *francs*."

Norton gave a drunken chuckle. He said:

"About seventy bucks! That's cheap, Eddy. That's a mere bag of shells."

Cordelier, however, was in deadly earnest.

"In a day or so I will let you know where we stand," he promised. "The minute I have something definite I will

get in touch with you at once. Meanwhile . . ." He glanced at his wrist watch and exclaimed, "My dear fellow, it's almost nine o'clock. We must be going."

"Let's step on it," agreed Norton, gripping the edge of the table as he levered himself to his feet. "Onwards and upwards!"

"Back to barracks," Cordelier said primly. "We have no passes, you know, old chap, and we must be in before lights-out."

CHAPTER III.

DISCIPLINE.

IT was close on six o'clock. The day, which had been hot and windy, was ending in a blaze of light. The level rays of the sun bursting like an explosion through the dust haze turned the clouds to scarlet and gold. The sky itself was emerald green deepening to violet along the horizon.

The upper stories of the barracks and the tops of the taller trees in the park outside the old ramparts were bathed in this incandescent light, but down below, on the drill ground, it was almost dark—so dark that Norton could scarcely see the features of Corporal Kleefeld, a big, beefy man who stood six paces away, spraddle legged, straight backed, the thumbs of his enormous hands hooked inside his belt.

Not that Norton particularly wanted to see Kleefeld's rugged countenance. He had been compelled to stare at that unprepossessing mug for so many hours that he knew it all too well. It had been burned into his brain so that, even at night when he slept, he was haunted by that unintelligent and ugly face with its undershot jaw and its

bloodshot eyes set close together astride a short, reddish nose.

The Legion was through fooling with Norton. For weeks, patiently, it had watched him with a hundred eyes and a hundred ears; it had tried mild doses of solitary confinement in vermin infested cells and prolonged séances in the guardhouse where drunks spewed their wine over the sleeping platform, and the air stank of vomit and unwashed feet. But Norton had showed no signs of improvement.

On the other hand, though he was impervious to such correctives, he was unfailingly polite and willing to do his best even if his best was very terrible indeed, and the powers that be had come to the conclusion that it would be inhuman to court-martial a recruit simply because he was too dumb to master the barest essentials of the French language.

The Legion, which had been in existence for a century, is old and wise and cynical. It has little faith in human nature, and learned long ago how to deal with all its vagaries and eccentricities. No organization on the face of God's green earth is better qualified to make silk purses out of sows' ears.

For this Protean task, in Norton's case, Corporal Kleefeld had been selected. He was the right man in the right place; in him the military spirit was incarnate. Discipline and Obedience were his twin gods; the *Code Militaire* was his Bible. He had a simple, straightforward mind free from all complexities. Had he been ordered by his platoon sergeant to learn Sanscript or higher mathematics he would have done so or perished (of meningitis, presumably) in the attempt.

When told to teach Norton French and stick to his post until Norton re-

sponded like an automaton to every order listed in the Manual of Infantry Training, he set to work with the same plodding thoroughness he would have displayed had he been detailed to clean the colonel's bathtub until it glistened.

A native of Strassburg, what he didn't know about French grammar would have filled enough volumes to make that dear old five-foot book shelf come off its hooks, nor did he have the slightest acquaintance with English, but that did not deter him.

His method was remarkable by its painstaking deliberation. Beginning with the first order in the Manual, he placed Norton in position, like a window-dresser adjusting a lay figure, and kept him in that position for minutes on end while he brayed the corresponding order in his face. Then, if Norton failed to respond, or responded too slowly, they started the same movement all over again. Time meant nothing to Kleefeld.

There was no mercy or kindness in his humorless soul. He worked Norton till he reeled, till his legs buckled beneath him; then he worked him some more, making him double-march, round and round in a narrow circle like a squirrel in a cage, making him cross the dusty, sun-baked exercise ground from end to end "by short rushes, in artillery formation," compelling Norton, with sixty pounds of kit on his back, to run ten steps, then flop flat on his stomach, arise, run, and drop again.

That day, when Norton stood swaying drunkenly in the gathering darkness, had been the hardest of all. The blisters on his feet had cracked open, his boots were wet with blood. Open-mouthed, glassy-eyed, sagging beneath the weight of his pack, he peered at the corporal, waiting for the last order

of the day which would send him, at last, limping down the road to the barracks. The bugle had sounded "retreat" almost fifteen minutes ago, but little things like that did not bother Kleefeld.

"Stand up!" he barked in a voice grown hoarse from too much shouting. "Like a man, thou ill begotten hunk of infection. Stiffen that damned back!"

A STUBBORN look crept into Norton's dull eyes. He did not move; not an inch. "Stiffen that damned back," was not as yet part of his official vocabulary.

Kleefeld, glaring at him, repeated the order: "*Tiens-toi droit, espèce de vache!* I'll cure you of that elegant slouch!"

As he spoke he glanced sharply from side to side. The exercise ground had long since been abandoned by the other troops. They were alone. The sun was down on the horizon, the color was ebbing out of the sky. Night was close at hand. Even the half-naked little Arab urchins, who usually stood about, sucking their dirty thumbs, while they watched the white soldiers drill, had gone to town to beg for pennies at the sidewalk cafés.

Kleefeld stepped up close and, clenching one of his great fists, drove it against Norton's ribs.

"We're going to reach an understanding," he announced. "You've been trying to make a jackass of me for the last three weeks, haven't you? That's fine. Now I'll teach you a few tricks."

The force of the blow had driven all the air out of Norton's lungs. Blood welled up in his throat, choking him. He coughed, and because he was weary to the point of exhaustion, his rifle

slipped through his fingers and fell into the dust.

"Pick that up!" rasped Kleefeld, accompanying the order by a backhand clout over the ear. "Don't make me say it again. Pick it up!"

Norton dropped to his knees. A kick in the small of the back sent him sprawling.

"I didn't tell you to lie down and go to sleep," jeered Kleefeld. "On your feet, you swine of an American, or I'll break every bone in your body. You've been asking for this—now you've got it."

Norton came up fighting. As he heaved himself to his feet he raised his rifle and tried to fling it butt-end foremost at the corporal's head. But Kleefeld was ready and waiting. With a contemptuous gesture he slapped the rifle aside and drove his fist into the pit of Norton's stomach. Then he caught him by the front of his tunic, half strangling him, and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"Discipline!" he said between shakes. "I'll put some discipline into your thick head, I will! I've had enough of this circus, I have! That's why I kept you out here tonight, just to settle this privately. Privately—you understand, you baboon? From now on you're going to *learn* something. I'll pound it into you! Tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after, we'll end every lesson just like this, my lad!"

"This" was a thoroughgoing thrashing, the time honored "*passage à tabac*," administered without heat or passion. In theory he had no right whatsoever to lay violent hands upon Norton; he could have been court-martialed for this offense. But there were no witnesses out there on the drill ground, and Norton, without wit-

nesses, would find it impossible to bring charges against his aggressor.

Kleefeld, moreover, was careful to leave no traces of his handiwork on Norton's face. It wasn't the first time he had felt called upon to resort to extra-legal methods in his dealings with ill-natured recruits. He knew where to hit and how to hit to cause the maximum amount of pain without leaving any tell-tale marks. He did not have to overexert himself. Norton was too weak and groggy to offer any further resistance. Kleefeld's bludgeonlike paws thumping heavily against his ribs and stomach seemed to tear his heart loose from its moorings. Again he went down and Kleefeld, after a couple of tentative kicks, stood back and placidly lighted a cigarette.

"That'll be all for today," he grunted. "*Debout!* Up! Now you know what it's like. Tomorrow night, if you don't understand every single order I give you, you'll get another dose of the same medicine. You're not going to make a fool out of Corporal Kleefeld, I can tell you that right now and once and for all."

At a brisk pace, as soon as Norton was able to stand up, he marched him toward the barracks down the long, straight road splashed with the glimmering yellow light of street lamps shining down through the dense foliage of plantain trees.

"TOMORROW and the next day and the day after that . . ."

Kleefeld's threat ran through Norton's mind as he lay on his cot in the barrack-room staring angrily at the row of shelves above the beds on the opposite wall.

On each shelf lay a square block of clothing, folded with rigid precision. And all the stacks were exactly alike;

they did not vary from shelf to shelf by a fraction of an inch; one and all contained the same articles of clothing, placed in precisely the same order.

Their impersonal uniformity reminded Norton of the days that lay ahead of him: one day like the next, accounted for down to the last minute according to a fixed routine over which he had no control whatsoever.

His own helplessness exasperated him, and as he lay there, nursing his bruised and aching stomach, he reached one definite, unshakable resolution. Not all the Kleefelds in creation were going to make a Legionnaire out of him.

He reached this decision with his eyes wide open. He had enlisted of his own free will (God and the examining medical officer alone knew that he had been half crazy with booze at the time); there was no loophole through which he could crawl.

But no matter what the cost might be he would not submit. That was final.

Everything connected with the Legion set his teeth on edge and aroused his latent antagonism: The rigid Eighteenth Century standards of discipline, saluting, forming fours, bugle calls, the everlasting sound of French voices, the unspeakable superiority of clean, well-scrubbed young officers, the taste of the sloppy black coffee, the boorishness of the drill sergeants, the all-pervading smell of creosote, rifle-oil and sweat . . .

They could send him to prison if they chose. It could be no worse than the regular routine life at the depot. He'd give them a damn good pretext for sending him up! Two pretexts if they preferred. One of them was Kleefeld.

"The next time he starts anything,"

decided Norton, "I'll fix his feet so they stay fixed."

The other concerned his dear old chum, his pal Cordelier. Cordelier had made a sucker out of him, bled him white, down to the last greasy five-franc note, the last dollar bill; strung him along with plausible lies, asking for more money and still more money; promising at each interview that it would be the last; that there would be no more delays. But the days had grown into weeks and Cordelier had suddenly become elusive as a wraith. In the office, of course, he was beyond reach. No trooper could wander in there and start an argument with one of the clerks without falling foul of a dozen officers, adjutants and other important personages, who would see to it that his exit was swift and painful.

Off duty, Cordelier was so slippery and devious that Norton could not catch up with him. He used back doors, avoided the parade ground, and spent all his spare time in town, where Norton had been forbidden to go until his period of private tuition under the guidance of Professor Kleefeld was over.

IT was a hopeless situation. There was little or nothing he could do about it. Even had he gone to town he would not have known where to begin the hunt for Cordelier.

The sound of voices, coming from the canteen, drifted through the open window. A drunk was singing a long-winded sentimental *leid* accompanied by an accordion which emitted unexpected squawks and groans.

By contrast the barrack-room was very still. With the exception of Derecske, the orderly for the day, all the men were out. Slumped down on a bench by the table in the middle of the

aisle, Derecske sat with his chin propped up on his folded hands, sleepily watching the thread of smoke rising from the bowl of a long-stemmed cherrywood pipe which he held loosely between his pouting lips.

The light of the lamp hanging from the ceiling fell full upon his round, smooth-shaven skull and the nape of his stumpy, muscular neck. A quiet man, slow and very deliberate, Norton had never had occasion to speak to him, though they had lived in close contact for weeks on end.

For no good reason Norton suddenly addressed Derecske's broad back, much as he might have addressed a lamp-post, without hope of an answer:

"Have you ever been rooked? I wonder whether anybody ever sold you a gold brick?"

Taking his pipe from his mouth, Derecske turned around until he faced Norton, who was startled to hear him say:

"Often. Why do you ask?"

Norton forgot the pain in his stomach. He sat bolt upright, grinning from ear to ear.

"You mean to tell me you speak English?" he exclaimed. "Suffering cats!"

Derecske took a little puff of his cherrywood pipe and said placidly:

"Why not?"

"But—"

Derecske cut him short. "There was no need. Each man must fight his own battle in his own way. I could not help you, and it is never wise to interfere. Just now, when you spoke, I was thinking of Pittsburgh. Plain as day I could see it . . ." He broke off, shook his head several times, then abruptly he went on, "Who's been rooking you?"

Norton swung his legs over the side

of the cot and stood up. Barefooted he shuffled over to the table and sat down, facing Derecske.

"Now listen," he said painstakingly, "are you kidding me or what have you? Pittsburgh—no, I've never been there. I'm from New York City, N. Y., U. S. A. D'you know 8th Street and

Norton. "Any idea where I can find him?"

DERECSKE nodded his head slowly several times. He had the very best of ideas where Cordelier was to be found. There was a girl in town—a Spaniard from Jerez—and he, Derecske, had been crazy about her. He had had no illusions as to her worth; he had known from the very beginning what kind of woman she was, but in her company he had been able to forget his present surroundings and the tragedy which had pitchforked him into the Legion.

"You see," he said, choosing his words with great care, "I come from Hermannstadt in Transylvania. It was—it is Magyar, but today the Roumanians hold it. They call it Sibiu! Sibiu!" His eyes flamed and his placid countenance suddenly twitched with rage. "That is how the Allied statesmen lived up to your Wilson's promise that there would be neither annexations nor indemnities after the War. That was their idea of a just and lasting peace..."

"I started something this time!" Norton told himself. "For crying out loud. He'll be talking war debts in a minute."

"It's a tough break," he said aloud, "but that don't help us—"

"They flogged my father to death," Derecske went on. "They beat him with whips made of steel wire because he would not learn to speak their damned, corrupt language. He was one of many! I shot the swine who ordered the flogging. An officer, he called himself—a captain. He used scent and powder like a woman, and he stood by, watching my father die, smoking a gold-tipped cigarette. I shot him in the stomach, and with these"—he held out



COLONEL BALIVERNE

6th Avenue? That's me... And you didn't give me the high-sign! Why, you son-of-a-gun, you..."

Derecske sighed deeply. "I have my own troubles," he explained, and that one statement seemed all-sufficient. "I have been also rooked."

"So we're both in the same boat. Listen, you been here longer than I have. You can go out. You don't happen to know anything about a cootie from the office by the name of Cordelier, do you?"

Derecske bit down on the stem of his pipe until it cracked.

"Cordelier?" he repeated, spitting out little splinters of wood. "I do know him—yes."

"Ain't that something!" approved

his enormous paws—"I strangled him. Then I escaped from that nightmare and came here. . . ."

It was Cordelier who, flush with money, had caused the girl to turn him down.

"And I'll tell you where he got the dough," Norton broke in. "From me."

Derecske listened in silence, his head thrown back, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling.

"So that's the lay-out," Norton summed up. "I've got to get him first. After that I'll deal with Kleefeld."

"And go to prison?"

"And go to prison."

Derecske got up, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, put it carefully away in the haversack hanging at the head of his bed, and started to dress.

"What's up?" inquired Norton.

"Put on your uniform and come with me," said Derecske. "I am going to take you to Cordelier."

"But you're the room orderly—"

"And then I shall go to prison with you or desert," Derecske stated in a level voice. "It is better so."

"You're cockeyed!"

"You have taught me a lesson. All this," he waved his hand at the walls, "all this is part of the system which makes possible the things that happened at Hermannstadt. I cannot serve on the side of the oppressors. It has tormented me for months. Now I am through."

CHAPTER IV.

REVENGE.

THEY left the barracks, not by way of the main gate, but over the back wall behind the stables. Minutes later they reached the ramshackle apartment house where

Señorita Vittoria Alvarez occupied a flat on the third floor.

Derecske knocked. After a brief interval the door opened an inch or so. A large, questioning eye appeared in the crack, and a throaty, not unpleasant voice said:

"*Sapristi!* You—again! Of all the pests you are the very worst, my poor Emanuelo! Haven't I told you a thousand times not to come here any more? You are not wanted. Go away and stay away and—" Suddenly the roving eye came to rest upon Norton. It grew dark with Iberian wrath and the voice, grown shrill, cried out, "So you have brought company, have you? This is too much! Why didn't you invite the entire garrison while you were about it? I won't have it. Get out!"

But Derecske's broad foot was across the threshold. He kept it there so that she could not close the door.

"Let us in," he ordered. "It is not you we want to see. It is Cordelier."

"He is not here," she retorted. "Go before I lose my temper! Go before I show your friend what I think of fools like you!"

"We are coming in," said Derecske, not budging an inch. "I know he is here."

The *señorita's* patience snapped. She flung the door wide open, leaped out onto the landing, and smacked Derecske's face—once, twice, and again, before he had time to draw a deep breath. As she delivered the third smack she hooked her pretty fingers and dug her nails into his cheek, gouging it from the corner of his eye to his chin.

"Now will you go, camel that you are!" she demanded, pointing dramatically toward the staircase. "Imbecile! Clod! Buffoon! I am a respectable girl, I would have you understand,"

she added for Norton's benefit. "I work for my living and do not intend to be annoyed by such miserable and stupid trash!"

Derecske stood his ground.

"Where," he insisted, "is Cordelier?"

Before the girl could select a suitable string of insults to hurl at him, Cordelier, aroused by the noise of those resounding smacks and the girl's impassioned outcry, bustled out onto the landing. The hall light was weak and at first he did not notice Norton half-hidden behind Derecske's broad shoulders.

Spick and span as ever, very sure of himself, very superior, he said sharply:

"You fool, do you want me to call the police and have you arrested? You damned peasant, you behave like a love-sick cow, but—" Then he caught sight of Norton and his haughty self-assurance oozed out of him. "You!" he exclaimed, stepping back across the threshold.

"You bet," agreed Norton, following him up. "You got two thousand francs of mine and fifty-seven bucks to account for, Eddy. We'll have a showdown right now."

The situation was complicated, however, by the unpredictable actions of the maiden from Jerez. Something told her that there was more at stake than the sunshine of her smile. She had no intention of being mixed up in a vulgar brawl which might lead to police intervention and have a disastrous effect upon her social position. During business hours she had a good job as second saleslady in the only high-class millinery-lingerie shop in Sidi-bel-Abbes. She did not want to lose that job. It brought her in contact with the best people in town and eventually might lead to bigger and better things.

Matrimony, for instance. One never knew; one had to be prepared for such emergencies. Furthermore, she was beginning to lose interest in Cordelier. Socially he was more desirable than Derecske, but the money he had squandered on her during the past few weeks showed signs of running low, and she had her eye on a young and sentimental second-lieutenant who was said to be very wealthy.

UNDER the circumstances she could not afford to hesitate.

Whirling around, she grabbed Cordelier by the arm, propelled him violently out onto the landing, and slammed and locked the door of the apartment in all their faces.

"Go away—all of you!" she called through the keyhole. "If you don't I shall scream out the window. I know none of you!"

But her words went unheeded. Backed up against the flowered wall paper, Cordelier was doing his slippery best to put up a bold front.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," he asserted. "Money? What money are you talking about?"

"Quit stalling," advised Norton. "It won't work, Eddy. I'm talking about the dough I gave you to give the Syrian so I could desert."

"You must be out of your mind, my dear fellow! As if I would help you to desert! Nonsense!"

"And you spent Norton's money on Vittoria," added Derecske, mopping blood off his cheek with a large cotton handkerchief.

All at once Cordelier flared up.

"What of it? You're a pair of stupid jackasses. If you can't take care of your women and your money, that's your hard luck. It serves you right. So you thought you were going to de-

sert!" He jeered, turning to Norton. "You're wrong. If you have no decency or honor—"

"Honor!" laughed Norton. "Hot dog!"

Cordelier turned white.

"That's what I said. You took an oath—you'll have to live up to it. Your money? If I have it—prove it! And I'll tell you something else, Norton: one more word out of you, one threatening gesture, and I'll report you to your company commander. I'll let him know that you speak French. He won't miss you. You'll go to prison. It's your last chance. Clear out!"

"You've got me coming and going," commented Norton, rolling back the cuffs of his tunic. "Boy, you're certainly a swell doublecrosser! He's a technician," he told Derecske, "and a French gentleman down to his itching finger-tips."

"So I have heard," nodded the Hungarian. "He—"

At that moment, Cordelier, fully aware that Norton did not give a curse whether he went to prison or not, sprang away from the wall and made a dash for the staircase.

He didn't go far. Derecske, with unexpected speed, thrust out an arm and swept him back with so much force that he crashed against the door of the flat facing the apartment occupied by Vittoria.

Raucous shouts came from within, while shrill screams issued from Vittoria's flat. Filled with panic, Cordelier aimed a kick at Norton's groin and, since Derecske barred the way to the lower floors, tried to race upstairs.

That kick settled his hash. It was no more than a glancing blow, but it jarred Norton's bruised stomach and roused him to instant and violent action. Three at a time he shot up the

steps, grabbed Cordelier by the knees, and dragged him down. Locked together, barging against the sagging, cracking balusters, they rolled about on the landing.

The whole house was in an uproar. Fifty infuriated tenants with hot Latin blood in their veins clamored for the instant restoration of peace and quiet. Women shrieked, strong men roared. The bravest among them surged up to the third floor with the avowed intention of hurling the combatants out on their ears. But Derecske barred their way. With oxlike stolidity he stood at the top of the steps and brought down his great fists on every skull that came within reach.

MEANWHILE Cordelier had succeeded in breaking Norton's hold. They came off the floor fighting. Cordelier launched a perfect *chassé-croisé* which almost broke Norton's shin bone. Norton evened the score more by good luck than good management with a couple of magnificent clouts. The first closed Cordelier's left eye. The other bent that long nose of his over onto his cheek, ruining its shapeliness forever.

He bled copiously down the front of his expensive, tailor-made tunic. But he was far from beaten. He fought with his teeth, his nails, his knees, and even with his fists. The technique of fouling held no mysteries for him. Closing in with a rush he drove one knee in the general direction of Norton's lower stomach . . . and an upper-cut rocked him back on his heels, almost tearing his head off his shoulders. That blow hurt. He tottered back against the wall, and the light shone full on his ghastly face. Shouts of dismay came from the crowd blocking the staircase.

"They are killing him!" some one cried out. "*Le p uvre!* This is murder!"

Cordelier heard those shouts. They renewed his strength and his courage. He battled desperately, doing his best to gouge out Norton's eyes, scarcely aware of the hail of blows which were creating such havoc with his handsome map.

Norton's tactics were not as showy, but they were far more effective. He didn't spout abuse, nor grunt, nor stamp his feet as Cordelier was doing for the benefit of the onlookers. He used his feet to stand on and slugged his opponent with everything he had. He missed often, but when he did manage to land a clean blow there was plenty of steam behind it.

Twice in quick succession he clipped Cordelier on the point of the jaw, and as the latter lurched unsteadily he walloped him with everything he had just below the ear. Cordelier's legs went from under him. He sat down, too badly dazed to remember the audience, and as he fell the shrill sound of police whistles filled the house. A loud voice could be heard braying:

"*De la place, voyons!* Make way!"

Rousing himself from his torpor, Cordelier struggled into an upright position, and his right hand groping vaguely through space chanced to close on Norton's left ear. He held on. The more he was hit the tighter he held on. His knees sagged, but he would not let go. He clung to Norton's ear as a drowning man is supposed to cling to a straw. In a half clinch they lurched across the landing, going faster and faster and faster until they came up with a mighty bump against the door of the *se norita's* apartment, tearing it off its hinges. It collapsed. They collapsed on top of

it, and as the policemen clubbed Derecske out of their path, Norton knocked Cordelier cold with a mighty clout on the chin and raised himself to his knees, nursing his mangled ear.

"Fiend," shrieked the *se norita*, making passes at him with a Japanese parasol. "Brute incarnate!"

"You took the words out of my mouth," panted Norton. "But I've had my money's worth, girly! I guess that'll hold him for a while."

Then the cops beat a smart tattoo upon his head with their little truncheons, snapped handcuffs on his wrists, linked him to Derecske, and rushed them out of the house, pursued by the curses of the assembled tenants. Cordelier went with them. Two policemen toted him down the steps, for he was still unconscious.

BUT it has been wisely said that he who laughs last laughs best, and Cordelier was destined to laugh right heartily after a general court-martial had dealt with Legionnaires Norton and Derecske.

Derecske was found guilty of being absent without leave, of creating a disturbance, resisting arrest and inflicting injuries upon two policemen and five civilians. His was not a bad case. He was given a year with the disciplinary battalion to think things over.

Norton's case was much more serious. The list of charges against him ran on for pages. Thanks to Cordelier, who dragged in the owners of the Greek restaurant who had heard him speak French, he was left without a leg to stand on. He had almost succeeded in ridiculing the entire staff of the training battalion. No one believed him when he said Cordelier had gypped him out of two thousand *francs* and fifty-seven dollars.

The Procurator held up Cordelier as a model of all the military virtues: he was loyal, disinterested, truthful! Did anybody really think that such a splendid young soldier, whose past record was an open book, gentlemen, would stoop to such base actions? A thousand times no!

When called to the witnesses' bar, before the dais where seven judges sat all in a row beneath the gray light dripping through the dingy transom windows, Cordelier refuted the prisoner's slanderous accusations with dignity and perfect self control. The judges believed him, for he was very eloquent. He had cultivated the prisoner's friendship, he swore under oath, to draw him out and put an end to his passive resistance, which was a disgrace to the Service, with a capital S. He had done this because he loved his regiment and his country! Yes, he confessed, he was French. He had joined the Legion because of an error in judgment that most men would have dismissed with a smile and a shrug. But he, Cordelier, valued his honor and the honor of his family so highly that he preferred to make a fresh start in the Legion...

Such statements are permissible in French courts where the laws of evidence differ fundamentally from those in use in Anglo-Saxon countries. Cordelier's act of faith, spoken in a voice vibrant with emotion, brought tears to the eyes of the seven judges. They praised his zeal and his devotion to the cause he served so well. But they stared stonily at the prisoner. Norton damned himself beyond redemption. He was neither humble nor abashed. He expressed no regrets. He was mad clean through and didn't care who knew it. When one of the judges asked him point-blank whether or not he

liked the Legion, he retorted impolitely:

"What the hell! I'm an American citizen. Think it over."

Which was no answer at all.

So the court put on its seven caps, buckled on its seven swords, and retired to deliberate, and Norton, in due course of time, was informed that he had been condemned to eighteen months at hard labor in a military prison camp.

"That's fine," he said blithely. "I'd sooner be a convict than a soldier in this outfit, believe it or not.—Signed, 'Norton'."

"Where you are going," promised the hard-faced adjutant who read out the sentence, "you'll soon change your mind—and if you live, when you come back to serve your full five years with the colors, my boy, you'll be a different man."

CHAPTER V.

JUNGLE WARFARE.

IT was early morning. The sodden earth steamed. Tree trunks and giant branches festooned with vines loomed out of the iridescent fog that closed in like a wall around the long line of men moving at a snail's pace through the dense undergrowth.

High overhead, above the mist, parakeets chattered, and a band of monkeys, alarmed by the presence of so many human beings, screeched and jabbered with hysterical fury.

At each step the soldiers sank through the deceptive matting of leaves and weeds and dead twigs into black muck so soft and spongy that it was no more than earth in the making—primeval slime, fetid and warm and enormously prolific, compounded

of water and decaying vegetable matter and silt brought down from the mountains by sluggish streams running flush with their low, uncertain banks.

Slowly the men moved forward. Standing knee-deep in the muck, they hacked their way through the jungle with the aid of heavy, long-bladed machetes. It was hot and close and damp. Sweat poured down their mud-caked cheeks. Their flannel uniforms clung to them in sodden folds. Around each man's head hovered an aureole of insect pests; the napes of their necks were covered with bright-red leeches, the size of pin-heads, which fell from the leaves they brushed against.

Spasmodic gusts of rifle fire burst from the jungle in front of the line of toiling men. Bullets tore through the leaves and vines with a long-drawn rattling sound. From time to time a slug struck home. Somewhere along the line a man would crumple up and sink into the soft, warm ooze, and vanish beneath its surface, so that nothing remained to mark the spot where he had died, save perhaps a blood-spattered sun-helmet with a hole through its crown, or the outline of a knapsack with a dented coffee-pot strapped across the top, rising like a headstone out of the mud.

The survivors went on, so preoccupied by their fight against the undergrowth that they were scarcely aware of the gaps that appeared in their ranks. Even the wounded received scant attention.

"We'll be back," promised the non-coms. "You'll be picked up." And in the same breath they shouted at their squads, "Keep moving! Don't lose your direction. . . . Bear in to the left. . . . Close up!"

It seemed to Legionnaire Norton that he had been standing in one spot

for long hours, hacking at the same green and pliant vines which, as soon as he severed them, sprang together again and barred his way. He had never been under fire before, but he was too exhausted to heed the bullets whistling past his head. This was work—not very different from the back-breaking, crushing work to which he had been assigned at the prison camp, back yonder on the other side of the world, in the arid hills of Morocco.

They had changed him up there. They had broken him, and remolded him, and cured him of all his crazy notions. He had been taught, and the lesson had been seared into his very soul in letters of fire, to respect his superiors and blindly to obey their orders. For his own good, for the good of the service, he had been kicked and beaten, half starved and overworked for eighteen months, until too much suffering and too much endless misery had blunted his senses and dulled his mind. He didn't think any more about whether or no he liked the Legion. He *was* a Legionnaire, and that one fact was all-sufficient.

Without a flicker of interest he had accepted his fate when, less than a month after his return to the depot, he had been sent East on a troopship, and rushed across country with a reinforcement draft to replace the heavy casualties suffered by the Lafourche column.

GENERAL LAFOURCHE was pacifying the 5th Military Zone, along the Laos border in the northeastern corner of the Tonkin, in French Indo-China. This mission of peace was necessary because the zone, which lay like a broad wedge between the fertile reaches of the Kong-Soo River valley and the equally desirable hill country to the northward, was in-

fested by turbulent scoundrels who made a hobby of butchering every soldier, tax collector or government agent who endeavored to penetrate their swamp lands. Their presence jeopardized the development of adjacent areas, and their destruction had been decreed in the name of progress.

The task, however, was no easy one. Decrees meant nothing to those people. In the jungle they ran rings around the French troops, popping up where they were least expected, vanishing into thin air whenever Lafourche's columns pressed too closely on their heels.

War under such conditions was a hit or miss affair, slow, costly and altogether unsatisfactory. Instead of clean-cut victories, there was an endless series of small but murderous scuffles which settled nothing and led nowhere.

The column to which Norton belonged (two companies of the Legion and one of Colonial Infantry) had been dispatched at an hour's notice to destroy a fortified village said to be the headquarters of a notorious gang of river pirates, whose depredations threatened to ruin the extremely profitable rice carrying trade on the Kong-Soo River.

On paper the expedition was a simple affair: a thirty kilometer march, a quick thrust driven home after intensive machine-gun preparation, and the job would be over. In practice it did not work out quite so well. There had been innumerable delays, one guide had had to be shot to stimulate the memory of two others, sickness had caused the ambulance service to break down almost at the very start, and as the column closed in at last upon the village it met with unexpected resistance.

But Norton was only dimly conscious of his surroundings. He moved like an automaton, going steadily forward, driven on by the sound of the voice of his platoon sergeant. It alone conveyed a definite meaning to his brain.

"Keep on... Keep going... Keep up..."

And all at once, quite distinctly, above the thousand noises that filled the jungle a new sound reached his ears. A bullet whistled past his head, but instead of the whistle becoming thin and attenuated as it sped on its way, in full flight—it stopped. It stopped with terrible finality and was followed by a soft thudding blow. *Thump!*

Norton glanced over his shoulder. The sergeant had fallen back against the branches of a thorny bush which held him upright though his legs no longer bore his weight. His face had been torn away. Below the wide open, goggling eyes hung a shapeless welter of shattered bone and mangled tissue out of which emerged the teeth of the lower jaw dangling askew beneath the left ear.

It was a monstrous parody of a human countenance, a grinning abomination which riveted Norton to the ground and held him spellbound. This was glory! This was the climax of all the discipline and training and presenting arms that went on at the depot. It all led up to this: to obscene disfigurement and death at the hands of an unseen enemy in a fog-shrouded quagmire, ten thousand miles from home.

Slowly, as the branches bent beneath its weight, the thing that had been a sergeant of the Legion slid toward the earth. Thorns held up the arms until they were almost at right angles to the shoulders; the head hung forward

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as though bowed down with infinite sorrow.

Then, abruptly, the body tore loose and sank into the mud.

A FIT of rage shook Norton. He went crashing through the underbrush, slashing furiously at the vines that kept him from coming to grips with the snipers. The ground beneath his feet grew firmer. The trees thinned out. Abruptly he found himself in knee-deep grass, in a clearing where the mist hung in thin, gray layers. A beam of pale sunlight fell upon the angle of a stockade made of stout bamboo poles lashed closely together.

Gusts of lead greeted the troopers as they emerged from the jungle. A machine gun away off on the left flank jarred into action, raking the flimsy wall, splintering it.

A bugle call rang out. A shout came out of the fog, repeated over and over again as it swept down the line:

"Close in on the left, the Eighth Company. . . . On the left. . . . Pass it along. . . . Close in. . . ."

That order had a steadying, sobering effect upon Norton, whose first blind impulse had been to rush headlong at the stockade. He responded to the summons as he had been conditioned to respond: automatically, without conscious effort. Swerving to the left, he ran in slow, heavy strides toward the place where the company was forming up. The faces of dead men, buried in the grass as in open graves, gaped up at him. Their outflung, twisted limbs made him stumble, and a bull-necked, thick-set sergeant-major bellowed at him:

"Get a move on! Hurry! Get into line! Hurry!" The company formed up on two ranks, and fixed bayonets.

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The men obeyed orders with crisp precision, but the sense of strain was acute, almost unbearable. On all the troopers' faces there was a withdrawn, self-absorbed look as if they were staring inside themselves and what they saw filled them with angry resentment.

They waited. The mist shut down, hiding the stockade. The thunder of rifle and machine gun fire filled the clearing. Several men were hit and sank into the grass. The ranks closed up. Then a young officer Norton had never seen before, a lieutenant with a black mustache, who carried himself jauntily though his torn clothes dripped mud, trotted out in front of the company, shouted "*En avant!*" and lifted it forward with a sweeping gesture of his sword arm.

A great shout burst from the Legionnaire's lips. All their pent-up emotions found instant relief in that wordless yell. Elbow to elbow they surged across the open. War-horns brayed deafeningly. The bullets came faster. The air was alive with them.

Norton raced along, staring over the shoulder of his front-rank man, straining to catch a glimpse of the stockade. All at once the fog thinned out. The palisade was not a stone's throw away. Fire spurted from rifle muzzles thrust through chinks between the posts. Behind the rifles Norton saw dark shapes moving.

Then came disaster.

A dispatch instructing the machine gun section to raise its angle of fire to cover the Eighth Company's advance had not been delivered, for the messenger lay dead with a slug in his brain. From the gun positions, because of the mist and the slope of the ground, the field of observation was extremely limited. And the Legionnaires blundered into the hail of bul-

lets before the officer who was controlling the fire could check it.

IT ate into the charging ranks, blew them to pieces. Caught in mid-stride, the men went down all in a row, like so many dominoes. The lieutenant, the sergeant-major, the entire left section were blotted out. In an incredibly short space of time there was no company left—only a handful of cursing, bewildered troopers who ran this way and that, and threw themselves flat on the ground as the hissing torrent rushed by.

Norton's platoon, on the extreme right, suffered least. The guns ceased fire as the men broke and fled. The brassy notes of a bugle cut shrilly above the clamor: "Retire! Retire!"

On hands and knees he crawled through the grass, away from the stockade, toward the trees.

"This way," some one was calling. "The Eighth, this way!"

A hand seemed to reach inside Norton's chest and close around his heart. He knew that voice. It echoed in his brain louder than the rolling thunder of the rifles, louder than the roar of the war-horns.

And as he crept toward the spot where the survivors were gathering, he came face to face with Cordelier—Cordelier with a sergeant's stripes on his cuffs, a pasty-faced, white-lipped Cordelier, sweating with excitement, who shouted like a parrot:

"This way the Eighth! This way!"

Their eyes met. Cordelier frowned, drawing down the corners of his mouth, as he tried to recall where he had first seen that lean-jawed, hard-bitten countenance. Then, behind the week-old stubble and the dirt, he recognized Norton, and his hand closed convulsively on the trigger of his rifle.

"What the devil are you gaping at?" he cried angrily. "Don't you understand what I'm saying?"

"It's been a long time," said Norton. "We've come a long way . . ."

He had sworn to himself that if ever he caught up with Cordelier he would kill him. For eighteen months he had clung to his life and his sanity for no other reason. And now that his chance had come, now that the point of his bayonet was not six feet from Cordelier's throat, he found that he could not bring himself to commit murder. He had seen too many men die that morning. His eyes still held the vision of his platoon sergeant hung up on the thorny bush, back there in the swamp, with his face shot away.

"We have come a long way, have we?" retorted Cordelier, trying to conceal his apprehension behind a great show of authority. "What nonsense is this, may one ask? Don't you worry—I remember you quite well. You are Norton. The American who tried to desert. You haven't succeeded, I perceive. That is excellent. Excellent! And you might as well bear this in mind: I am a sergeant, from the Fifth Company, and you will be good enough to keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking to me. I have quite enough to do without calling you to order. I am in charge of your company for the present." He cleared his throat importantly even though his eyes, darting from side to side, were full of uneasiness.

"Commandant Grugusset gave me special orders to reorganize the right flank."

"That," agreed Norton, solemn as a judge, "is a guarantee of success, of course."

"You—" began Cordelier, on whose cheeks two bright red splotches had

appeared. "Confound your insolence!" Then he changed his mind and said, "That will do! Get back there and rejoin your section. I'll deal with you later, if you compel me to do so!"

Waving Norton away, he raised his voice, shouting at the men crawling through the grass:

"This way the Eighth! Over here! *Rassemblement!*"

CHAPTER VI.

SHOT FROM BEHIND.

CORDELIER did not want to be reminded of the far-off days when he had not hesitated to resort to dubious expedients to obtain money to satisfy his expensive tastes for wine and women and tailor-made uniforms.

Norton had been but one of his victims. There had been many others both before and since, and he might well have gone on practicing his astute little pranks at the expense of gullible Legionnaires had he not, in an inspired moment, bethought himself of his family.

In France, "*la famille*" means much more than it does among foot-loose, independent-minded Americans. It is the most significant factor in French social life. Given an influential *famille*, a black sheep need never despair. Something will always be done for him. And Cordelier, with his tongue in his cheek, had written to the king-pins of his clan to tell them how sorry he was his escapades had cast dishonor upon his wonderful *famille*. He swore he was a reformed character and intended to carve out a new career for himself in the army. It had worked like a charm. Occult forces had been brought to bear where

they could do most good, and the authorities at the depot had been pleased to cast a benevolent eye upon the industrious young clerk who was reputed to be such a brilliant engineer.

The proper place for a gentleman equipped with such an array of academic honors was the officers' mess, but Cordelier had been given to understand that, first of all, he would have to win his spurs. And spurs were not to be won while sitting in a swivel chair. An uncle had chipped in with an allowance which had enabled him to reform without giving up any of his nasty little vices, and he had sallied forth from the office all the way to the banks of the Kong-Soo River on the edge of the Laos country.

It was his first experience of bush warfare, and he was not enjoying the sensation. All too clearly everything was going haywire. Commandant Grugusset, a fire-eating optimist, had underestimated the enemy strength, and launched his first assault without bothering to prepare a coherent battle plan. The result was a first class mess. The Eighth Company of the Legion had been cut to pieces. The Fifth, farther to the left, had not yet extricated itself from the quagmire. The Colonial Infantrymen were wandering around on the right flank, somewhere, on the far side of a low fold in the ground, which was said to be alive with snipers.

During the momentary panic which had followed the virtual annihilation of the Eighth, Grugusset had pounced upon Cordelier and had ordered him to round up the survivors and establish a liaison with the Colonial Infantry. It wasn't the kind of work Cordelier was accustomed to. Ever since he had been on active service he had managed to wriggle from one good staff-billet to another, and had never

displayed the slightest inclination to expose himself to the enemy's fire.

Grugusset, however, had not stopped to realize that in sending Cordelier into action he was depriving himself of the services of a zealous, amiable and efficient assistant-secretary. Far from it!

"Here's your chance," he had declared. "You have a good head on your shoulders, my boy. I can't spare another officer. Impossible! Out of the question! But you'll do. Round up the Eighth. Get it out of the way—under cover. Give the men a breathing spell. We may need 'em later on."

THESE words were balm to Cordelier's jangled nerves. He did not relish the job, but he had to live up to his reputation—a reputation for heroic courage he had built up for himself, even while he was making out ration returns in triplicate and penning fair copies of the commandant's reports to headquarters.

Until Norton had appeared upon the scene he had been getting along quite nicely. "This is dreadful," thought Cordelier. "This is terrible! He is bound to gabble, this crapulous swine of a Yankee. He'll do his best to belittle me. Damn him and his miserable two thousand *francs*! If Grugusset hears of this—of course he wouldn't believe a word of it, but a doubt might subsist in his mind. And the men would lap it up. They'd love it!"

Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, ran down the sides of his long, slightly crooked nose.

"I must get rid of him," he decided. "He doesn't count: a jailbird. I'm not going to be held back by any such vermin. My life is more important than his."

Puffs of smoke eddied above the

grassy slope on the right flank. The bullets were hunting out the Legionnaires of the Fifth Company as they stumbled out of the jungle. Cordelier pursed his lips and stared intently at the slope, until, abruptly, he reached a decision.

"Legionnaire Norton!" he called. "Come here at once. Norton," he went on as the latter crawled up beside him, "you see that ridge? Very well. The Colonial Infantrymen are on the other side—somewhere. I have already sent out one patrol to find them and order them to join forces with the Fifth. I want you to follow up the patrol and make sure the order has been delivered."

Norton's glance traveled slowly from Cordelier's tense face to the low ridge half hidden by the mist and the smoke.

"You're in a hell of a hurry to get rid of me, ain't you?" he jeered. "What's the trouble? Afraid I'll put a bullet in your nut while you ain't looking?"

"Speak French!" snapped Cordelier. "I refuse to answer your stupid question. My feelings toward you are wholly impersonal, free from prejudice of any sort. Is that clear to you?"

"You bet!" agreed Norton. Those two words were all-sufficient. Had he spoken for half an hour he could not have expressed his contempt and derision more explicitly. But Cordelier chose to overlook the insult.

"I am sending you," he said, in a firm yet friendly manner, "because I happen to know you are American. You do not take kindly to discipline," he shrugged his shoulders and smiled one of those nasty-nice smiles which could be interpreted ten different ways, "but I have great faith in your personal initiative. I am giving you an

opportunity to wipe the slate clean, Norton, and make a fresh start. As you see, I bear no malice . . ."

"For what? Taking my dough and sending me to prison? Cut out the tripe."

"You have your orders—obey them!" retorted Cordelier, abandoning all pretense. "If you refuse to obey, don't forget you are on active service and may be shot for cowardice in the presence of the enemy. Are you going? Yes or no?"

FOR a brief instant Norton wavered uncertainly, then, without comment, he stood up, tucked his rifle under his arm, and ran, crouching low, toward the ridge. His own impotence filled him with disgust. Even though he distrusted and despised Cordelier, Cordelier was a sergeant and he had to obey him. *Had to!* Either he carried out the sergeant's orders or they would tie him to a stake and put twelve bullets into his chest. . . .

So he ran toward the ridge, where the mist was thinning out, and Cordelier on his knees in the grass watched him go; watched him with the hard, unwinking stare of a bird of prey, following him step by step to the foot of the ridge. And as Norton began to climb the slope his bent back became visible; a blurred khaki patch burrowing among the weeds.

With a quick movement Cordelier snatched up his rifle. He drew a deep shuddering breath as he brought the sights to bear on the figure on the slope. He leaned forward, pressing his sweaty, bearded cheek against the smooth gun stock. His trigger finger grew taut.

Crack! The air hissed through his teeth. Over yonder, the figure had vanished. For a second or so the weeds

and the grass quivered spasmodically, then all was still again.

Cordelier jerked the spent cartridge shell from his rifle and crawled toward the Legionnaires.

"I bagged that one!" he exclaimed joyfully. "There's one sniper who will snipe no more! That's not bad shooting—at three hundred meters—a bull's eye!"

Only one man looked up, a gaunt, hollow-cheeked trooper whose eyes were bright with fever.

"That's fine as long as you didn't make a mistake," he pointed out. "How about that fellow Norton—he was going that way—"

"I've had my eye on this sniper for the past fifteen minutes," swore Cordelier. "Norton, you idiot? Norton crossed the ridge long before I fired."

"And the machine gunners thought the same thing about us."

"Nonsense," Cordelier said emphatically. "Utter nonsense. Accidents will happen, you know, but we mustn't allow ourselves to be demoralized. We must have courage!"

The man's only answer to that exhortation was an undignified and insubordinate grunt.

IT was high noon. Out of a silvery-white sky the sun beat down upon the clearing. A pillar of smoke and flame towered above the burning village. Showers of sparks and blazing thatch palm leaves whirled through the air, kindling scores of new fires in the treetops.

The whole world, it seemed to Norton, smouldered and smoked in the quivering heat haze.

With fingers grown numb and clumsy he pushed his sun helmet back to cover the nape of his neck. The effort left him weak and shaken, racked with

pain. A bullet had punched a hole in the back of his right thigh. It was still in the wound, lodged in the muscles just above the knee. The force of the impact had bowled him over. Before he had been able to open his first aid kit he had lost so much blood that he had lost consciousness.

Hours had gone by. He had come to in time to catch a glimpse of the Legionnaires and Colonial Infantrymen swarming through gaps in the stockade. The noise had swelled to a mighty crescendo, then had gradually died away as the fighting rolled through the village and spread along the banks of the stream.

Very gingerly Norton sat up. The wound reopened as he did so. He felt the blood flow and spread inside his mud-caked pants. The first aid bandage lay in the grass, a foot or so away. To reach it, and open it, to tear aside the leg of his trousers was a slow, agonizing struggle against leaden muscles and reeling brain. With infinite difficulty he twisted around sideways and poured the contents of the iodine vial into the open wound. The accompanying wave of burning pain made him yelp. Through clenched teeth, his lips drawn back off his gums, he shouted crazily:

"Why the hell don't they come out and get me? Are you going to let me leak to death, you buzzards? Killing people! Murdering 'em! I don't give a damn about your lousy war. I won't die out here like this!"

Then he laughed at his own blind terror, and the sound of his laughter sent a chill racing down his spine.

"I'm going nuts," he announced, nursing his throbbing leg between both hands. "What if I do croak? There's plenty more to keep me company and if—"

He left the sentence unfinished as he gaped stupidly at a face which had appeared all at once on a level with his boots. An oval, ivory-yellow face with almond eyes and delicate, finely-moulded features. A lock of glossy, blue-black hair hung down over the forehead.

The faintest suggestion of a smile hovered around the lips.

Norton's hand went instinctively to the rifle lying close beside him, but he had not strength enough to lift it off the ground.

"Well?" he croaked. "What's on your mind, Image?"

The image spoke in a thin, breathless voice:

"I heard you speak English. I am wounded also. My ankle is, if I may so express myself, shot to hell. I wonder whether you would mind letting me have a drop of water—if you have any water."

Norton closed his hot, dry eyelids, and held them shut for at least three seconds. When he looked again the face was still there, peering at him over the end of his muddy boots.

"Suffering pups!" he muttered. "What do you want? Water? Sure—there's some in my bottle. But you'll have to come and get it. I can't move. I've been bleeding like a stuck pig."

The man squirmed out of the grass, his breath hissing through his indrawn lips as he dragged his shattered ankle behind him. Norton's astonishment gave way to dumfounded amazement when he saw that the native was dressed in European clothes—a coat of white linen, tweed plus fours, golf stockings, and pigskin shoes. A shirt of blue silk and a polka-dot bow tie completed the startling ensemble.

"Where the flaming blazes did you come from?" ejaculated Norton, help-

ing the man loosen the catches of the bottle at his belt.

The bottle was no more than half full. The native raised it to his lips and drank sparingly.

"Thank you," he said. "I am much obliged. You are American, are you not? I thought so. I studied law at Columbia University."

"Say that again!" ordered Norton. "Columbia University? Morningside Heights . . . the North River . . . traffic lights . . . remember the old Fifth Avenue buses? I can see 'em plain as day." Tears dribbled down his cheeks. "I'm a damn fool, but I can't help it," he complained. "New York! It's night over there. There's people going to theaters, and Broadway's crowded, and some lucky stiff is taking his girl to the movies, and—" he broke off sharply, glaring at the native, "we're here! Killing one another, burning villages that ain't on any map, crawling through stinking slime to pump bullets into each other's hides. Does that make sense? Does it? The hell you say!"

HE slumped down, holding his head between his fists, exhausted by his own outburst.

The native said quietly:

"You must tie the bandage around your wound or the flies will infect it. You speak of murder," he went on, "is it a crime for a man to defend his home—for a tribe or a nation to resist aggression? What brought *you* here?"

"You'd be surprised," grunted Norton. "But if you think I wanted to come, take it from me, you're wrong."

The man's features did not move, in his eyes alone appeared a glimmer of contempt.

"I cannot argue with you. I do not wish to arouse my captor's ire."

"I ain't keeping you," Norton assured him. "For all of me, you can beat it all the way back to Cherry Street—and good luck to you. I didn't start this war."

The native propped himself up on one elbow. For a long moment, lost in thought, he stared at the blazing stockade.

"No," he said at last, "you did not start it, but the French did, and you are fighting for the French."

"Now listen—" protested Norton.

"I know!" the man broke in. "To you this is a great adventure—an escape from routine and monotony. You spoke of New York a minute ago. Why didn't you stay there, where your life was secure, where you were among your own kind? Why did you come here in a French uniform to fight and to conquer—"

"I'm no conqueror, doggone it!" muttered Norton. "Wait till I tell you."

But the man didn't wait.

"Conquest!" he went on bitterly. "That may not have been your motive, but that is the result of your actions. What *are* you fighting for out here? You don't know and you don't care." His thin voice hissed like the lash of a whip. "You do what you are told to do."

Norton, in his own unexpressed opinion, was feeling lousier and lousier from second to second. The pain in his leg was subsiding, but he was very dizzy and faint, and he found it increasingly difficult to make his eyes focus on the native's face, which seemed to recede and to grow smaller and smaller until it was no bigger than a pin point. Oddly enough the man's voice was very loud and distinct.

"You do what you are told to do," he repeated.

"If I don't," said Norton, "I'll be shot."

He could not articulate properly, for his tongue was thick and dry.

"You *have* been shot," the native pointed out.

"'Tain't the same thing. You know what I mean. They'd line me up before a firing squad."

The native's voice filled his ears, echoed inside his reeling brain:

"We fight for our liberty, as your nation fought in '76. You are fighting for tea planters and rice brokers, financiers and manufacturers. You are fighting for company promoters and ten per cent dividends."

A QUARTER of a mile away the village blazed and the smoke cast a shadow across the white-hot sun. Men in small, scattered groups fled through the waist-high grass followed by other men, who shot them down.

"This," said the native, "is nothing. This bog, as you call it. But beyond lies a richer soil, a better climate, and in the hills there are huge deposits of tin and nickel and tungsten; there is a dense population which can be taxed and put to work and exploited. These are the things you are fighting for."

"I wish you'd lay off me for a while," pleaded Norton. "I keep telling you it ain't my war. I ain't interested. I've seen enough. I've seen too much! But what can I do?"

The native's fingers closed around his wrist.

"Do you mean that?"

Norton laughed wearily, as men laugh when they have reached the end of their tether and can see no hope ahead, no relief from suffering and misery.

"Do I mean it? Man alive, I've been in this outfit almost three years; I've been in prison; and not a day has gone by that I haven't hated it. If I'd wanted to be a soldier I'd have joined the Marines or the Navy. . . . I'd fight for my own country any day, but this—can't you understand?—it's none of my business. I'm a radio operator, and—"

He stopped, stared wide-eyed at the native, then all the color drained out of his cheeks, and he keeled over onto his back, and lay there limp and motionless, breathing so faintly that the native had to place his cheek close to Norton's lips to find out whether he lived or not.

The man took another drink from Norton's water bottle, replaced it on its hooks and crawled slowly toward the jungle, dragging his crippled leg behind him.

CHAPTER VII.

CONDEMNED!

AFTER the doctor had gone his rounds, Norton left the ward and limped out onto the veranda of the hospital. It was raining in sheets, a warm downpour which obscured the broad and muddy expanse of the Kong-Soo River flowing by at the foot of the terraced garden.

The veranda was crowded with convalescents. Here and there a man nodded as Norton went by, but no one attempted to make room for him on the benches. Most of the patients became very interested in their card games or the magazines they pretended to read. Silence walled him in. Conversation died down as he advanced, and was not resumed until he had gone by.

The nursing sister on guard duty

hurried toward him, an eager smile on her smooth, round face.

"There is a chair down at the far end," she told him. "I kept it 'specially for you. I'll make you comfortable in no time at all."

Norton, however, came to a halt by the screen door.

"If it's all the same to you," he said pleasantly, "I'll stand here and look at the view."

There was nothing to be seen except a strip of rain-sluiced lawn, but Sister Genevieve did not attempt to dissuade him.

His presence had a bad effect upon the wounded heroes intrusted to her care. They couldn't relax properly when he was about. There was something very wrong about this gaunt, hollow-cheeked Legionnaire with the hard eyes and the bitter mouth. He was "under observation" by order of the military authorities. This was supposed to be a secret, but the news had leaked out as such rumors will from the hospital office. No one knew whether Norton was a spy, an agitator, or merely a soured and untrustworthy soldier. One thing was certain: the Intelligence Service was ready to pounce upon him just as soon as it had completed its investigation. His fate was bound to be unpleasant, and none of the other patients, quite naturally, cared to be mixed up in any way with such a dubious and unsavory customer.

Sister Genevieve, who was kindness itself, stood beside him, uneasily fingering the beads of the rosary at her waist.

"I saw your chart this morning," she said with assumed brightness. "You are coming along wonderfully well. Practically no temperature and your leg will soon be as good as new,

won't it? You have much to be grateful for, my poor child! It is a miracle that the doctors were able to save you!"

She looked at him hopefully, and he rewarded her good intentions with a grim but not unpleasant smile.

Nothing definite had been said to him by the doctors or the officials with whom he had come in contact, but he was well aware of the fact that he had been listed as a suspicious character. He needed no sixth sense to warn him that he was in danger. He had been much too outspoken for his own good when the surgeon at the field dressing station had taken a French Lebel bullet from his leg, and when the fever had addled his brains he had raved and cursed so vigorously that he had been shifted from the general ward to a private room, where he could gabble to his heart's content without contaminating his fellow sufferers.

Since then he had been discreetly pumped by the resident psychologist and a swarm of lesser lights, ranging all the way from medical corps orderlies to convalescent troopers. They had done their best to draw him out, but he closed up like a clam, and his silence itself had heightened the suspicions of the investigators.

He dare not trust anyone, not even the nursing sister standing beside him.

"Yes," he admitted, "I am much better."

The beads clicked through her fingers.

"Soon you will be leaving us, going back to your regiment." There was a catch in her throat. "I am sure you will welcome the opportunity of doing your duty."

She was doing her best to help him, waiting for some favorable remark she could relay to the medical board.

"I shall obey orders," he assured her.

"Joyfully?"

That was going too far. He might be headed for prison, or a padded cell, or the firing squad, but not even to please Sister Genevieve would he pretend that he enjoyed being a Legionnaire. He had made a mistake; he was paying for it in full; he asked favors of no one.

HE left her question unanswered, and after an awkward interval he said:

"Doesn't it ever stop raining in this part of the world? We haven't seen the sun all week."

She moved a step closer.

"Something is troubling you," she began.

"The rain," he declared. "I'm tired of being cooped up."

"But you love your regiment, don't you? You are proud of it. If you tried hard enough you would be promoted very rapidly. Isn't that worth striving for—to serve faithfully and loyally—"

He cut her short: "You're wasting your time, Sister. I have nothing to say. I am a 'bayonet unit,' as the textbook says. My thinking is done for me—which takes a great load off my mind."

Sister Genevieve edged away.

"I must go," she explained. "But you must cheer up and look on the bright side of things. I'm sure you need a tonic. That's just what you need: a good tonic. I shall speak to the doctor about it."

He stood where she left him, staring at the rain, until he heard footsteps moving toward him and a heavy hand closed on his shoulder.

He wheeled around, half expecting

to find himself confronted by the provost-marshal come to arrest him. Instead he beheld Derecske, just as four-square and chunky and slow moving as he had been in the old days at Sidi-bel-Abbes.

Norton greeted him enthusiastically.

"You almost gave me heart-failure! What are you doing out here, you old son-of-a-gun? I'm damn glad to see you! How's everything?"

Derecske accepted this outburst with his usual ox-like calm.

"I heard you were here," he explained. "Me? I have been out here quite some time. I have been looking for you."

"Have a good time with the Disciplinarian Battalion?"

The Hungarian's blue eyes twinkled.

"A very nice time—and you?"

Norton laughed, his first spontaneous laugh in many months.

"The happiest days of my life were spent at Camp 8, north of Taza! I'll never forget 'em. They were just too kind to me for words, up there. We had a dear old adjutant—the soul of honor. He loved to rap me over the head with his blackjack."

"And now?"

"Not so good," shrugged Norton. "I've been blacklisted."

Derecske nodded. "So I gathered. I've been coming here every day for the last two weeks. They weren't going to let me in today until an officer came along and said it was all right."

"Maybe it is," agreed Norton, "but I wouldn't linger long if I were you, or they'll get you, too. This business of being watched ain't so hot."

They were silent while an orderly who had been hovering in the back-ground came up with a bucket and a rag and mopped up a puddle of water by the door.

"The walls have ears," cautioned Norton, as the orderly slouched away. "That cootie speaks English well enough to misunderstand everything we say. He's a pest. How come you're in this neck of the woods?" he went on, lowering his voice. "I had a hunch you were going to make a break?"

DERECSKE'S square face grew hard. "That is coming—soon. Very soon now. There was no hurry. I volunteered for service in Tonkin because before I leave the army I want to meet Cordelier once more."

"That buzzard?"

"But that is not what brought me here today. We can't talk here. I have news for you—big news." Looking straight to the front, he spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I met a friend of yours recently. He wants to see you as soon as possible."

"I have no friends. Who are you talking about—the keeper of the jail or the president of the next court-martial?"

"Ever heard of William Van-Prao?"

"Nope."

"I think you have. Van-Prao lost a leg some time ago. He tells me a bullet struck his ankle and the leg had to be amputated because—"

"Got you now!" exclaimed Norton. "For the love of Mike! That bird—I thought I must have dreamed about him—"

"He is very much alive. Can you leave the barracks this evening?"

"Not a chance!"

"Convalescents are allowed out. You must apply for a pass at once."

"Yeah! And they'll give me the horse laugh."

"Try. If that does not work, find

some other way of getting out. You must, unless you are willing to spend the rest of your days in prison."

It was much easier than Norton had anticipated. He went to the office convinced that his request would be brutally refused. Nothing of the sort happened, however. The regimental sergeant-major to whom he applied was almost affable. A pass? Of course he could have a pass! Why hadn't he asked for one sooner? A few hours in town would do him a world of good!

At five thirty, when he left the hospital, he found Derecske waiting for him outside the gates.

"It looks sort of fishy," confessed Norton. "They seemed glad to turn me loose. I don't like it worth a cent. If you want to call it off there's still lots of time. There's no sense in getting you in Dutch, too."

"That is my business," retorted Derecske. "I know what I am doing and why. I came out here to find Cordelier—but Cordelier no longer matters. I hate all this more perhaps than you do."

He waved his hand at the buildings lining the square they were crossing.

"Look at 'em—banks and wholesale houses and government buildings! Soldiers conquered this country, soldiers like us; those God-fearing business men loot it."

"With due process of law," Norton chuckled. "Loot is part of the white man's burden."

"And bullets," added Derecske. "Bullets come first. What right have you or I to be here? It's all right for the French to colonize this part of the earth if they want to, but where do we fit in? It reminds me of my own city: Roumanian officers monopolizing the tables at the café while the gypsy

orchestra plays to the people standing outside in the gutter."

"We're being followed," Norton broke in. "At least it looks that way to me. See that civilian? There! Passing under the street lamp. He picked us up as we left the hospital. I've learned to spot 'em."

"Can you walk a little faster?" queried Derecske. "Let me take your arm. Where we are going he will find it hard to follow."

HE turned into a side street, and they passed abruptly from the well ordered quiet of the European settlement to the swarming squalor of the East, hurrying through a succession of muddy, narrow, congested streets filled with stocky little brown men, some naked to the waist, some clad in knee-length garments of black cotton.

It was dusk. The rain had stopped, but the sky was overcast and the stagnant air was as hot and clammy as the steam room of a Turkish bath.

"How far are we going?" inquired Norton, wiping the sweat off his face.

The Hungarian took a firmer grip on his elbow.

"We'll be there in a minute—but that's only a beginning. You have seen the last of your hospital. You're never going back."

"Rather sudden, ain't it?"

"Any regrets?"

"Just one," Norton replied. "I'm damn sorry I didn't fix Cordelier's feet. I had a good chance—but I couldn't do it. I bumped into him the day I was wounded."

"I heard about that also. I met some of the men of your company at the canteen. Some queer stories are being told about Cordelier. One of them concerns you. It may not be

true, but one man swore he saw Cordelier shoot at you."

Norton stopped dead in his tracks.

"So that's how it happened. Why, the lousy swine!"

"Never mind that now," urged Derecske, dragging him along. "It is unimportant. Cordelier," he added dryly, "was mentioned in dispatches for courage and resourcefulness under fire. He had been transferred to General Lafourche's staff."

"And he's the guy who sent me out on patrol and put a bullet in my leg!" sputtered Norton. "Why didn't anybody report him?"

"A thing like that is hard to prove. If you can't prove it the best thing a man can do is to shut up. Don't bother about Cordelier—you're all through with him."

He slowed down as they reached the corner of a dark and evil-smelling alleyway. Dim electric lights (symbols of progress) shed an uncertain glimmer upon the black-turbaned heads of the crowd moving slowly past the cluttered little shops on the main thoroughfare.

There were no Europeans in sight at the moment.

"This way," Derecske ordered sharply. "Quickly!"

Midway down the alley they came to a house, no different from a thousand other native dwellings. A thread of light showed beneath the door. Derecske put his knee to the door and thrust it open. In the middle of a small, low-ceilinged room a very fat Chinaman in a patched blue shirt squatted beside a mound of old rags which he was sorting out and bundling. The rags stank. An oil lantern standing on a low stool threw wavering streaks of light and shadow across the Chinaman's moon face.

He did not appear surprised when the two soldiers came tumbling in.

"All clear?" Derecske inquired in French.

THE Chinaman nodded and spat a long jet of betel-nut juice at random among the rags. Without a word he heaved himself to his feet, picked up the lantern and led the way through a back room and across a yard, where a lean sow and her progeny wallowed in muck so foul that Norton almost gagged. They came to a shed into which they squeezed. The Chinaman extinguished the lantern and lowered a roll of matting which shut out every last scrap of light. Then he knocked on the wall, a door swung open, and Norton stepped into a white-washed cubicle as small and bare as a prison cell. A camp bed, two stools, a table, and a kerosene lamp comprised the furniture.

As the Legionnaires, half blinded by the light, stumbled across the threshold, a man limped toward them. He wore native dress: a knee-length tunic of black silk with a closely fitting collar, and a small turban of the same material, but Norton recognized him instantly. He would have known that face in any crowd. It had breeding and self-composure and the same indefinable expression of aloof indifference Norton had observed on statues in Buddhist temples.

"Here he is," said Derecske. "I think we were followed part of the way, but we shook 'em off."

The man bowed.

"I have been looking forward to this minute a long, long time. You are more than welcome. You have not forgotten our last meeting?"

He gave the two stools to his visitors and lowered himself onto the

camp bed. The peg-leg stuck out stiff and straight in front of him.

"I'm damn sorry you had to lose it," Norton began. "I suppose—"

"It does not matter," Van-Prao assured him. "We have no skilled surgeons to patch us up. Our friend Derecske tells me you are just as dissatisfied as ever. Is that so?"

"Absolutely."

"Then will you listen carefully to what I have to say. I shall be as concise as possible. First, a question: I take it you are anxious to desert?"

"Right!"

"One more: Has Derecske told you anything about me or my plans?"

"Not a word."

Van-Prao nodded. He lit a cigarette before he spoke in a low, monotonous voice. He was not, he explained, a native of the flat lands where he had first met Norton. He came from a small principality to the northward, in the hills near the Chinese border. At the peace conference which had followed the Franco-Chinese war the fate of the principality had been left in doubt. No one had taken the trouble to consult its ruler, nor had it been mentioned by name in any treaty. Because access from the south was extremely difficult it had enjoyed over forty years of independence, while the French consolidated their position in Tonkin and China disintegrated in a welter of anarchy and blood.

"But we are not going to be left alone much longer," said Van-Prao. "The French are clearing the road to Bac-Ming as fast as they can. It is slow work—slow but steady. Bac-Ming is their logical goal. It is the door to the interior of China, and that means trade, profits, new zones of influence to be developed. They will drive a railroad through the swamps to tap our

natural resources. The financiers and the industrialists won't object to that. The French are badly in need of oil; there is oil up our way in enormous quantities, according to the geological surveys. The refiners want to break the Anglo-American monopoly; the government wants a private source of supply of crude oil in case of war—so they make war against us to obtain control of our oil beds. Amusing? Very! That's why General Lafourche is pouring men like you into the swamps, and that, also, is why we are delaying and hampering his advance. We shall fight," he said, biting off each word, "to the very end with every and any weapon. We are not going to surrender. Personally, I am ready to die, but I will not submit."

"But you can't win," said Norton.

"Of course not, but our effort will not be wasted. We can set a pattern for our sons and our son's sons to live up to. Will you help us?" he asked abruptly.

"In what way?"

"A thousand. You understand wireless. Propaganda is a mighty weapon. There's the oil. Perhaps we could organize a company of our own. You could be useful there. And you would be free."

NORTON stood up and held out his hand. "I'm with you," he said. "All the way. This is something worth fighting for."

Derecske clouted him on the back.

"That's what I said! I was sure—"

Somewhere near at hand a shout rang out, a loud, inarticulate cry, followed instantly by the sound of a shot. Four more rang out in quick succession. A fragment of plaster, torn off the wall above Van-Prao's head, fell onto the bed. The shouting redoubled.

Through the flimsy partition men could be heard floundering about in the hog-wallow, calling to one another.

For an eternity the three men in the narrow room stared at the jagged hole in the wall.

"They've got us!" Derecske burst out.

"Quiet!" ordered Van-Prao.

He hobbled across the room and blew out the lamp. The white beam of an electric torch split the darkness. It crept along the wall until it came to rest on a narrow door at the far end of the room.

"I don't think they have found this entrance," Van-Prao went on. "Not as yet."

He extinguished the torch. Very gingerly he slid back the bolt, and as he did so hell broke loose. A dozen men surged forward so eagerly that the leaders became wedged in the doorway. Cursing and struggling, they hung there for a split second, and Van-Prao, dragging an automatic from his pocket, let them have it at point-blank range. Four men dropped. Van-Prao ducked and slid out of the room as the survivors recoiled, but neither Derecske nor Norton was able to follow him.

Before they could move, the door through which they had first entered the room gave way. Shafts of dazzling light beat upon them, front and back.

A voice yelled, "Put 'em up, you swine! Up!"

Derecske tore his bayonet from its scabbard and rushed like a bull straight at the speaker. A lick of flame spurted out of the shadows. Shot between the eyes, stone dead, Derecske fell flat on his chin with a thud that shook the whole house. Out of the smoke a man loomed up in front of Norton—a face

lighted from underneath by a bright beam of light, a face with a long, thin nose and a mouth all twisted with hate.

Cordelier!

Norton lashed out savagely, but his fist never reached its mark. The butt end of a gun crashed against his skull, and he slid down into merciful darkness and oblivion, where for a little while he was freed from all pain and anguish.

CHAPTER VIII.

ESCAPE.

NORTON sat in his cell, resting his elbows on his thighs, staring vacantly at the floor. The night was so quiet that the steady pulsation of his heart rang in his ears.

He had come to the end of the road, the long road he had traveled since the day in Marseilles when he had gone haywire and joined the Foreign Legion.

The grim ritual of the trial lay behind him. The endless waiting, the red tape, the uncertainty, all these were over. Everything, life itself, was over. Military degradation, and hard labor for life had been the verdict of the court. As soon as the sentence had been approved by the advocate-general at Hanoi, he would make his last ignominious appearance in the Legion's uniform. The buttons would be ripped off his tunic, the badge torn from his cap, then gendarmes, representing the civil authorities, would take him in tow, and he would be paraded past the assembled troops, while the drums thundered and volleyed as they sped him on his way to prison for life. After that he would be herded with murderers and thugs, and he would be indistinguishable from them. Eventually

he would land in French Guiana, where another kind of hell awaited him until at last he died. He was twenty-five years of age.

There was nothing he could do about it. He was lost. Van-Prao had vanished. Derecske, the lucky devil, was dead and buried. He, Norton, had been made the goat. But he was past anger and sorrow. He experienced no twinge of bitterness when he recalled Cordelier's appearance before the court: a very smart, smug and conceited Sergeant Cordelier, who had literally simpered as he told the judges how, since his transfer to the Intelligence Department of the Legion on the staff of General Lafourche, he had been assigned the task of tracking down one Guillaume Van-Prao reputed to be one of the most dangerous agitators in the country.

Of course Van-Prao had escaped, but that wasn't Cordelier's fault. His subordinates had not followed his instructions. Nonetheless, thanks to his technical training which had sharpened his deductive powers, he had smoked out Van-Prao and kept him from exerting his pernicious influence upon the minds of the rank and file of the Legion. He had learned, he explained with becoming modesty, that Van-Prao had been sent to America at one time by a secret nationalist organization with headquarters at Canton. Acting upon this information he had shadowed Derecske, who was known to have lived in the United States, and Derecske had led him to Van-Prao's hiding place. But he had not been content with this master stroke. Norton, he was convinced, was also involved, and he had taken the necessary measures to make sure that Norton could leave the hospital without let or hindrance. And as a result of his bril-

liant exploits, there stood Norton, a self-convicted traitor to the flag he had sworn to serve!

But all that belonged to the past, so far as Norton was concerned. Sitting there in the dark cell, listening to the slow throb of his heart, he was overwhelmed by the certainty that he would never again be free. The sentence read: "*travaux forcés à perpétuité*"—perpetual hard labor—which meant that there could be no reprieve, no pardon until death released him.

The thought made him wince. He looked up, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the night sky dimly visible through the barred window of his cell. It would have been bad enough had some misfortune landed him in an American prison; the fact that for the rest of his days he would be among foreigners was the last straw. But it didn't break his back.

"I'll beat 'em to it," he swore, "if it takes ten years—if it takes twenty! I'll get out."

A SLIGHT sound caused him to look around. Rats, maybe, scuttling along the floor—or some one moving in an adjoining cell. Again he heard the sound, a very faint scraping, which seemed to come from the door. It was too dark for him to see across the cell. He sat motionless, and after an interminable period the air suddenly felt cooler against his cheek.

A hinge creaked, it was no more than a pin point of sound, but Norton knew that some one had entered the cell. A match flared up suddenly, high and bright as the light of an explosion. The flat-featured, brown face of a native sergeant of the *Tirailleurs Tonkinois* swam toward him out of the darkness.

In two strides the sergeant crossed the cell and bent over Norton.

"*Viens!*" he whispered. "Come."

Then the match went out and Norton felt the sergeant's fingers close around his wrist. Dry-mouthed, his knees shaking, he allowed himself to be led out of the cell. The corridor was empty. A lantern glowed above the heavy door barring the way to the guard room. Tugging at Norton's arm, the sergeant headed in the opposite direction until they reached an empty cell at the far end of the passage.

Striking another match, he pointed upward at the window. Two of the bars had been wrenched from their sockets. The aperture was wide enough for Norton to squeeze through. Rooted to the ground, he gaped at the sergeant, but the latter was in no mood to be gaped at or to answer any questions. He was in a desperate, feverish and quite un-oriental hurry.

"Up!" he ordered.

"And you?" inquired Norton, wondering whether he might not be about to be shot in the back, according to the classical formula, "while trying to escape."

The sergeant handed him a thick, heavy automatic, and again pointed to the window.

"You first. I follow."

They scrambled out the window, making, it seemed to Norton, more than enough noise to wake the dead. An eight-foot drop landed him in a narrow, stone-paved courtyard. His feet were bare. He lost his balance and rolled over, wrenching the muscles of his leg weakened by the bullet wound in his thigh.

The sergeant landed upright with the stealth and grace of a cat. Side by side they crossed the yard and headed toward the outer wall of the barracks.

Somewhere above the clouds there was a full moon. Occasionally a stray beam of light shed an uncertain glimmer upon the near-by buildings. The voices of the sentries mounting guard on the ramparts echoed in the stillness.

KEEPING close to the wall, the sergeant led the way to an open shed which housed the farrier's shop. A ladder had been concealed behind a tool chest. He propped it against the wall.

A wave of hope, headier, more intoxicating than champagne, tingled in Norton's veins.

"Liberty," he said to himself, "here I come!"

It seemed to him that all danger was past. He was out, he was free, he was going places.

And as he reached the ramparts the moon broke through the clouds, and a sentry fifty yards away bellowed:

"Halt! Who goes there? Halt, for the second time—Halt!"

"Jump!" hissed the *Tirailleur* sergeant, prodding Norton in the small of the back. "Go!"

The sentry was galloping along the narrow walk. Norton lowered himself over the edge and let go. *Crack!* A bullet missed him by inches.

He dropped in knee-deep mud and again his leg gave way. The sergeant dragged him to his feet. Bullets hailed about them as they splashed out of the moat and fled down a narrow path. The night was alive with noise; dogs barked and whistles blew; rifles banged and some one yelled:

"I see them! They are going toward the river!"

The tumbledown shanties of camp followers lined the wayside. Norton caught glimpses of half-clad people clustered in doorways as he raced

along. And abruptly, sprung from nowhere, a gendarme lumbered into the sergeant and tried to throttle him. They hung there for a full second, their tendons cracking as they strained against each other. Other men were pounding up the path. Norton heard them coming fast. His hand closed on the butt of the heavy gun in his pocket. He drove the muzzle against the gendarme's side and jerked the trigger.

Then they were running again and the sergeant was all doubled over as he coughed and spat. They passed the last houses; around a bend Norton saw the surface of the river glistening in the moonlight. Their pursuers were not a stone's throw away. He stopped and emptied the automatic at them without visible effect. The sergeant dragged at his arm, cursing him in a shrill, squealing voice.

They reached the river bank. Norton heard an engine purring, saw a long, black shape at the water's edge. The engine's voice swelled to a sputtering roar as he slid down the muddy bank.

Some one grabbed him by the scruff of the neck; the sergeant boosted him from behind. Almost before he landed in the cockpit the launch shot away from the bank.

When his breath returned Norton sat up. The launch was in midstream, traveling fast, though the engine had been throttled down.

"Well," said a voice. "Feeling better?"

Van-Prao, a cigarette between his fingers, sat on the bench close beside him.

"I feel like a million bucks," croaked Norton. "I had a hunch I'd be seeing you as soon as that sergeant showed up. I can't begin to tell you—"

"Don't," said Van-Prao. "That

sergeant is one of my best men. He was useful where he was, but he served his purpose: he got you out of prison. There is much work for us to do."

THE French were coming. They were over yonder, somewhere, behind that range of hills standing out sharp and clear against the pale-blue, rain-washed sky. A sluggish, slow-moving crowd filled the roadway and rolled in an endless stream down the steep hillside toward the red rooftops of Bac-Ming.

Defeat, apathy, indifference, were stamped on the brown faces that flowed past Norton as he drove his pony at a slow walk toward the old temple on the brow of the ridge.

The French were coming. For two years these people had fought stubbornly, holding onto every inch of their land. But the pressure had become too great. The slow, unwieldy columns had come crawling out of the steamy lowlands, closing in upon Bac-Ming from three sides at once like steel claws. No decisive battle had been fought, but from one day to the next the defensive forces had crumbled and all semblance of resistance had ceased.

With difficulty Norton breasted the crowd and urged his pony into the courtyard of the temple. Other horses were gathered there, guarded by coolies in sheepskin coats huddled around a wood fire. A sentry with a breechclout hanging down below a soiled and threadbare khaki tunic squatted on the mossy steps leading up to the temple. He did not raise his head as Norton, having dismounted, hurried past him.

Indoors two youngish men stood by a charcoal brazier, warming their hands. They wore peaked caps and cheap, badly made khaki uniforms.

Heavy revolvers stuck out of the holsters fastened to their belts. On the floor, close to the brazier, thrown down in disorder lay a heap of automatic rifles, cartridge belts, and crates of ammunition. Beyond, against the rear wall, an enormous stone statue of Buddha towered up into the shadowy darkness which the shafts of sunlight slanting through holes in the roof could not dispel. The place smelled of opium smoke and rotting wood and manure.

Van-Prao, who had been standing by one of the high windows talking to a group of elderly natives wearing their ceremonial robes of office, limped forward as Norton came in. He looked very tired, and his thin face was stamped with the same apathy which hung like a cloud over all the faces Norton had seen that morning.

"My message reached you," said Van-Prao as they shook hands. It was less a question than a statement of fact. "I expected you sooner."

"Couldn't make it sooner," snapped Norton. "We got tangled up with their advance guard in the Sai-Kieng Pass. We gave 'em hell until we ran out of ammunition. Why the blazes didn't you send me some of that stuff?" he demanded, jerking his thumb at the crates on the floor. "Haven't I been yelling for cartridges all week? It's a sweet mess!"

Two years of that life had left their mark upon him. He had grown lean and hard and direct. He had learned to trust no one, to expect no help, to doubt the motives of all those with whom he had to deal. And as all hope of ultimate success disappeared he had watched the slow disintegration of his companions' courage and endurance. Jealousy, treachery and greed had spread among them like a disease.

Van-Prao lit a cigarette and blew out the match with great care before breaking it in two and dropping it to the floor.

"I sent for you," he explained, clearing his throat, "because there is to be a meeting this morning. A meeting," he repeated, stressing his words, "with the French . . . to come to an arrangement with them."

"So it's all over . . ."

"I don't know." Van-Prao was as calm as ever, but a vein on his neck, just below his ear, throbbed jerkily. "It—it is hard to say."

"I thought you swore there was to be no surrender. Changed your mind, have you?"

"We have no choice," said Van-Prao.

ONE by one their plans had been shot to pieces. At first they had been successful—spectacularly successful. French outposts had been driven back, lines of communication raided, supply convoys destroyed.

On several occasions the outside world had actually heard rumors of the existence of Bac-Ming. News stories—Norton's handiwork—had appeared in the press about the vast oil deposits awaiting development in that remote territory. Imperceptibly, however, the tide had turned. Wireless equipment and other merchandise ordered from Canton was lost or destroyed before it arrived. Nothing more was heard about Bac-Ming, and Bac-Ming was promptly forgotten.

Diplomats on the other side of the earth put their sleek heads together and talked sagely about prestige and balance of power and the danger of fanaticism in the Far East. From foreign office to embassy they haggled and bartered with exquisite refinements of

speech and manners, and the low cunning of horse thieves.

And the storm clouds gathered over Bac-Ming. Outlawed, without outside support, Van-Prao and his followers had been slowly ground down, muffled and gagged, choked into silence. Their faith in one another, in the cause they fought for, had turned to distrust and suspicion. Many clamored for peace—peace at any price—that the business of sowing and reaping and trading might pick up again.

Norton stared through the arched entrance at the ragged army of disaster streaming past the gates. Beyond them, across the valley where the city of Bac-Ming lay huddled inside its girdle of old brown walls, there was a broad gap in the hills—and beyond that gap, blue in the distance, lay China.

"So, what?" insisted Norton. "What are you waiting for? What are you going to arrange with the French?"

Van-Prao shifted his weight from the wooden stump to his left leg. He flicked the ash off his cigarette several times before he spoke.

"You mean—escape? That is not possible. I cannot run away."

"Who wants you to? How about the city? Are you going to let it go without a fight?"

Van-Prao nodded in the direction of the group of men he had been talking to. Norton knew most of them. They were the leaders of the community: pearl-button mandarins, money lenders, merchants, councilors who had governed the province and administered justice before Van-Prao had stepped into power with his newfangled ideas and unorthodox ways.

"They will not stand for it," he explained uneasily. "They insist that we come to terms."

"That's nothing new. They've been making the same song and dance ever since I've been here. What's all this hooey about a 'meeting having been arranged'? It's the first I've heard of it."

Van-Prao's embarrassment only increased as he defended his actions. He had been approached, he said, by French envoys. They were ready to recognize his authority and to come to terms with him. Had he refused to entertain their proposals he would have been overthrown and some one else—some one willing to make peace—would have stepped into his shoes.

AND, he went on before Norton could speak, the terms he had been offered were very liberal and honorable. Instead of outright annexation the French were disposed to make of Bac-Ming a buffer state with the status of a protectorate. In that case he, Van-Prao, whose family had ruled Bac-Ming for many generations, would retain his rank and his privileges.

"How much are they offering you?" inquired Norton. "Remember what you once said about never submitting? How about it?"

A pinkish tinge crept into Van-Prao's cheeks. He was silent for a long while, then he said even more gently than was his custom:

"You are hurt because I did not take you into my confidence. I did not have time to do so. It was a matter I had to decide alone, without consulting you or any one else. The French think we are in a position to go on fighting. If they find out our situation is hopeless I shall be swept aside."

"I see," agreed Norton. "And I don't blame you. When all is said and done, this is your funeral, not mine.

I'm not trying to tell you what to do. If you can get good terms—fine and dandy! More power to you. When is this meeting of yours taking place?"

"Any time now."

"Then," concluded Norton, "I'm going to make tracks. You don't need me any more. You're all set. I'll be on my way—"

"On your way where?"

Norton pointed northwards.

"China. Catch a train to Canton and—"

"No," said Van-Prao. "Not yet. I cannot let you go. I want you to stay. I—er—want the French to know that I am proud to have had your help."

Not a word he said rang true, but even so Norton refused to distrust this little yellow man who had been his comrade and his friend for two years.

"That's swell," he declared, "but the less the Frogs see of me the better. I'm still a deserter. If they find me here they're sure to raise hell."

"In all probability they will have forgotten all about you," shrugged Van-Prao. "If they haven't, I shall insist that they allow you to leave without being molested; I won't have it said you were forced to escape like a criminal."

Norton shook his head.

"You're all wrong. What's the use of complicating matters? What they don't know won't hurt 'em. I'm going while the going's good."

"You must stay," repeated Van-Prao, and it dawned upon Norton that a chasm lay between him and all these people. They did not think as he did, they did not act as he did. None of them—not even Van-Prao.

Out of the tail end of his eye he saw that while they had been talking the two armed men had left the brazier,

and now lounged in the doorway. Their right hands rested on their revolver holsters. They were watching him.

"All right," he agreed, with an assurance he was far from feeling, "if that's the way you feel about it, I'll stay a while longer."

"I knew you would!" exclaimed Van-Prao. "I shall never forget your unselfishness, nor your—"

"What's this: an obituary notice?" retorted Norton.

CHAPTER IX.

BETRAYED.

SHATTERING the silence a hammering, vibrant sound all at once filled the temple. It came again, louder, more emphatic. Drums. One long roll and another, and a third.

The road outside the gate was empty. The last stragglers had gone by.

Bram! Bram! Bram! The air quivered. The noise was as threatening, and as real, as a clenched fist.

Van-Prao winced. He seemed to shrink in upon himself, to grow very old and stooped. A thousand tiny lines, like cobwebs, furrowed his cheeks. For a brief instant he looked at Norton, and his eyes were those of a man in torment. Then the look vanished. His face became a yellow mask.

"Stay here," he ordered curtly. "Don't come out till I call you."

As he turned away the drums rolled again, hammering out their warning. He took a step in the direction of the group of notables shuffling slowly toward the door, then he swung around and laid a hand on Norton's arm.

"You brought a gun with you?" he inquired.

"I did."

"Loaded?"

"Of course."

For the third time the drums rolled. Van-Prao inhaled deeply through distended nostrils, like a man about to plunge into icy water.

"If I cannot save you," he said in his mild voice, "you will know what to do."

Norton jeered at him, "Want me to commit suicide?"

"It is an honorable way out," admitted Van-Prao. "Enough lives have been thrown away. We must avoid reprisals. When our time comes we must know how to meet our fate—"

He did not wait to hear Norton's retort. He backed away awkwardly on his wooden stump, keeping his hand in his pocket, covering Norton with his gun. He spoke to the two men in the doorway, then turned and led the procession down the steps, out across the courtyard to meet the French.

And as they assembled by the gate, bugles filled the morning air with their joyous, brassy clamor. The tune they sang echoed inside Norton's chest. He knew it and knew it well. It was the marching song of the Third Battalion of the Legion.

With his feet planted wide apart, his fists on his hips, he stood erect and motionless in the middle of the empty temple, staring straight before him.

Then while the bugles blared, a soldier, one lone man, swinging a rifle at the end of his arm, stooping slightly beneath the weight of his huge knapsack, trudged past the gate. He went straight on. For a moment the road was empty, then a squad of perhaps a dozen men appeared, and the sight of them brought back to Norton the very smell and feel of the Legion: creosote in the barrack rooms, sockless feet in greasy boots, the tug of packstraps on

aching shoulders. It was closing in upon him again, getting ready to smother him for the last time.

The squad went by. Next came the clique—two drums and six bugles, then a mounted officer.

The tune stopped.

"Company . . . Halt!" brayed a voice. "On the right form line: Right . . . dress!"

Norton's muscles twitched involuntarily. Even after two years of freedom that shouted order almost forced him to obey.

"Thank God I'm out of it!" he thought. "Yes, sir, I'd sooner be dead."

HE glanced over his shoulder. The colossal figure of Gautama Buddha, sitting on a bed of lotus leaves, smiled down at him out of the shadows. All the so-called wisdom of the East was in that smile, and to Norton it was meaningless. It looked gentle and tolerant and unbelievably cruel and indifferent.

"Yep," nodded Norton, "you don't give a damn. Save your own hide and let the other guy go to hell and gone. I get you."

The sound of voices came from the courtyard. A French officer seated on a glossy-coated sorrel was leaning forward, one hand resting on his thigh, speaking to Van-Prao.

"You are acquainted with General Lafourche's terms," the officer was saying. "They are final. They cannot be discussed. They must be complied with in full before any further negotiations can take place."

Norton's heart skipped a beat. A band of iron seemed to have been clamped around his head.

The lieutenant was Cordelier. Cordelier with a medal on his chest. Cor-

delier up from the ranks, promoted for his zeal and his efficiency, looking very haughty and unyielding as he parleyed with the enemy.

Norton stepped back into the shadows, past the glowing charcoal brazier. The two guards in the doorway had forgotten him. They were staring wide-eyed at the French troops standing in the roadway.

"We demand the surrender of all your war stores," Cordelier went on, after Van-Prao had spoken in a voice inaudible to Norton. "All ammunition, rifles and other weapons . . ."

The Chinese border was not five miles away. It lay just beyond the gap in the hills . . .

Cordelier's words rang in the silence:

"Are you prepared to hand over the deserter, Norton, whose nefarious influence helped prolong your resistance and caused needless bloodshed? General Lafourche ardently desires to bring the blessings of peace to Bac-Ming. He is prepared to grant you and all those of your race complete amnesty, but this amnesty will not, under any condition, be extended to renegades and deserters such as Norton."

He sat bolt upright while he made this speech. It came rolling off his tongue in well-rounded periods, and as he spoke he peered over the heads of the delegates gathered around Van-Prao as if expecting to find Norton trussed hand and foot, ready to be delivered like a bundle of dirty washing.

"Is His Excellency the General prepared to admit my legal right to rule—" began Van-Prao.

Lieutenant Cordelier raised a gloved hand and made an impatient gesture, cutting the question short.

"That will have to wait. General Lafourche has no intention of inter-

fering in any way with your established customs . . . but hostilities will be resumed at once unless you comply with our terms of surrender. Are you ready, yes or no, to hand the deserter over to us?"

Van-Prao bowed.

"Very well, I am at your orders, lieutenant. One moment, if you please." He turned and called out: "Norton! Norton! Come here!"

There was a brief pause. Cordelier's horse played with its snaffle bar. Van-Prao's eyelids fluttered as if he were waiting for a gun to go off.

"Coming!" Norton cried.

FROM inside the temple a shot . . . two . . . a dozen rang out. The guards rolled down the steps. Norton, an automatic rifle in the crook of his arm, appeared suddenly in the doorway.

Cordelier stood up in his stirrups. His mouth flew wide open. But he was all through talking. Bullets swept the courtyard. They caught him waist-high, broke him in two, spilled him out of the saddle. Van-Prao went down, his spine shattered at the base of the skull. White-lipped, his eyes blazing, Norton marched down the steps, firing as he advanced, pouring a stream of lead into the panic-stricken mob milling crazily about the gateway.

The drum of cartridges lasted till he was within a few feet of his pony. He threw the gun aside, drove his fist into a coolie's face, vaulted into the saddle, drove his heels into the pony's flanks. . . .

The wall surrounding the temple grounds was old and crumbling. There were wide breaches in it, choked with mounds of rubble and weeds. Straight toward one of these gaps he headed

the pony. Twice it stumbled as it hunted for a footing on the uneven blocks of masonry, then at last it reached firm ground and streaked down hill at breakneck speed.

A volley filled the valley with echoes. Slugs spattered in the mud close to the flying hoofs. Norton swung the pony around in a wide arc until a group of peasants' huts lay between him and the marksmen lining the temple wall.

The ground leveled out. Snipers tried to bring him down as he raced across open fields. Their shots fell far short.

He passed a quarter of a mile from the walled city, forded a stream, and galloped on through a wide valley.

Ahead, clear and bright in the sunlight, lay China.

IT was a dirty day. The Statue of Liberty loomed green and glistening out of the rain. Wall Street's skyscrapers were hidden behind fast-moving clouds.

Bareheaded, up in the bows of the S.S. Knickerbocker, Norton stood sniffing the wind. The cold made his teeth chatter.

"Lady," he said, "am I glad to see you!"

A man in a heavy ulster, a first-class passenger who had ventured forward to clear his head after too many farewell drinks, examined Norton with amused curiosity.

"Friend of yours?" he inquired.

"I'll say she is," laughed Norton. "It's been almost five years since we said good-by. That's a long time . . ."

"Um," said the man in the ulster. "You have been to Europe?"

Norton nodded vaguely. He was watching a little tug steaming down the wind-whipped river.

"There and elsewhere," he admitted. "Especially elsewhere."

The man sighed. He had spent a happy month in Paris buying dress models for his firm.

"Paris is a great place, isn't it?" he said reminiscently.

"You can have it."

The man laughed. "You don't mean to say you don't like it! Why, it's the brightest and gayest city in the world. Compared to the French we don't know the meaning of the word freedom..."

"Is that right?" drawled Norton, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Now let me tell you something. Maybe we don't know anything about freedom and liberty over here. Maybe not! But we have enough to suit me. We mind our own business. When we need raw materials we buy 'em—we don't grab off half the earth and colonize it, and gut it, and civilize it with bullets. May-

be we're dumb—but we're half way honest."

"Quite," agreed the man, backing hastily away. "You're quite right. Yes, indeed."

Norton forgot him. Leaning far out over the railing he yelled at a deck-hand on the tug:

"Hi, buddy! What d'you say?"

The man, a broad grin on his face, waved back. His voice reached Norton above the whistling of the wind:

"Hi, there, buddy! Welcome home!"

With those words an immense weight seemed to be lifted from Norton's shoulders. He had no money, no job, no prospect of a job. But such things were of no earthly importance just then. He was home again, among his own kind, one hundred and twenty-five million of them, and that one fact, for the present at least, was all sufficient.

THE END

The Deadliest Hour

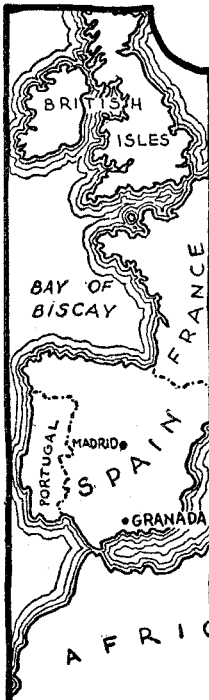
ACCIDENT figures show that the worst time for an automobile ride is Sunday evening between five and six. Least dangerous is Tuesday morning between six and seven.

—Delos White.

AMERICA'S BIGGEST SHAVING VALUE...

• Introduced but a few months ago, Probak Jr. has won recognition as America's biggest shaving value. For this double-edge blade is super-keen—gives you one smooth, quick shave after another. It is a sturdy blade—especially processed to shave tough beards without irritation. Automatic honing and stropping make it uniform—amazingly easy on your face. Just try Probak Jr. and see for yourself.

The Alhambra



IT was during the Middle Ages that the invading Moors conquered Granada in southern Spain. Among the many edifices which were built during the reign of the Moorish monarchs, none is more splendid than the ancient fortress palace known as the Alhambra. The name, signifying in Arabic, "the red," is derived from the color of the sun-dried bricks made of fine gravel and clay, of which the outer walls were built.

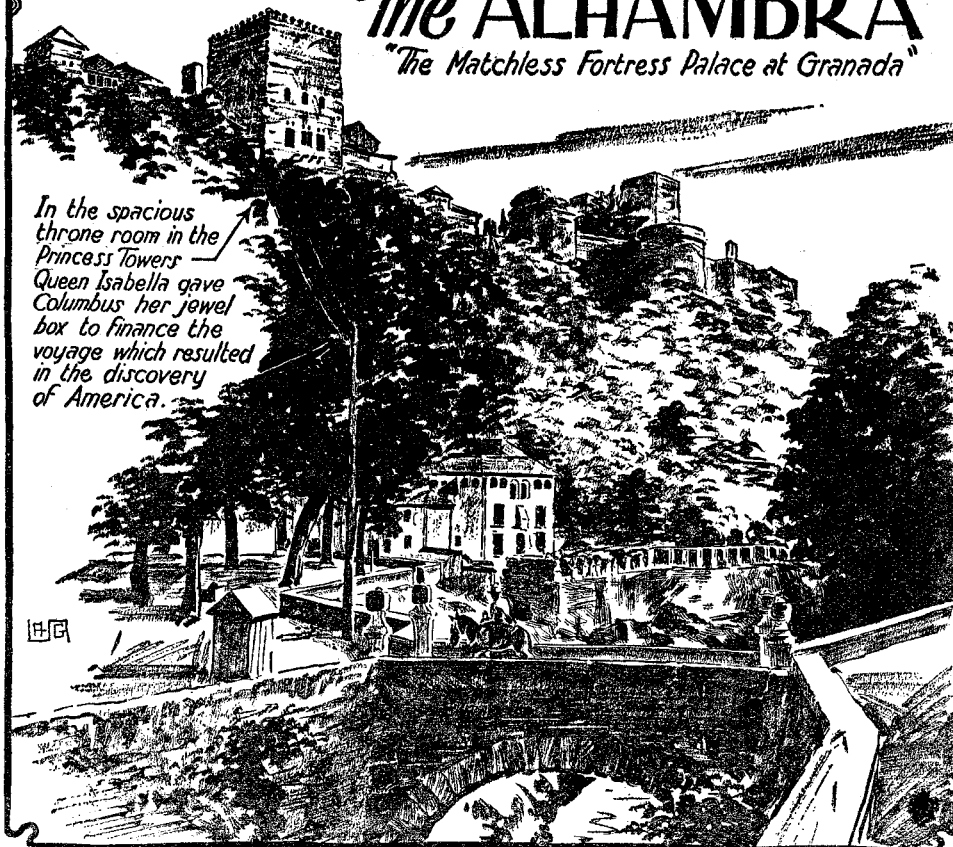
Everywhere in this combined citadel and palace are to be seen evidences of the delicate taste and artistic luxury of the Moors. Spacious courts, with marble pillars and fretted ceilings, and filigree stuccos of lace-like transparency are among the main features of this royal residence. Enclosed within its walls were gardens in which orange and myrtle bloomed and sparkling fountains played. Every artifice known to the Moors contributed to render the Alhambra an abode of Oriental magnificence, to which only the fantastic creations of the *Arabian Nights* can be fitly compared.



The ALHAMBRA

"The Matchless Fortress Palace at Granada"

In the spacious throne room in the Princess Towers Queen Isabella gave Columbus her jewel box to finance the voyage which resulted in the discovery of America.





Heading Boss

By BORDEN CHASE

Co-author of "East River," "River Tunnel," etc.

CHAPTER I.

TOUGH RIVER.

Blaster and Mutt knew little of the nicer things of life, but when a tunnel had to be punched beneath a South American torrent, they were the men to do it

THE town of San Miguel had just one excuse for its existence—the Rio Blanco Diablo. Far back in the hills a tiny rivulet threaded a silver stream through the shrubbery. At times it was lost, buried beneath the heavy foliage of forest giants. But persistently, steadily, it plunged ahead. And a river was born—one more of the numerous South American rivers.



Muck began to slither through
the wooden barrier

When the driving tropical rains came the river lifted above its banks, roaring and plunging, sending thousands of tons of white water in a head-long rush to the ocean. It was a wild river, a crazy river that seemed to take a delight in carrying away each railroad bridge that was built above it. Three times in as many years it had swept away the foundations and left the bridges a tangled mass of steel upon its banks.

Of necessity, the town of San Mi-

guel had sprung into existence. The bridge builders needed a place to live. They needed food, clothing, and a place to laugh and drink. For three years San Miguel had supplied these needs. And a strange town it was. Heavy chested, thick-necked construction men roamed the streets. Engineers, iron workers, riggers, painters and all the many men who were needed in the building of a bridge became its population—a North American town in a South American republic.

Civilization was far away. It is true the railroad sent one train a day through San Miguel. But the train never stopped unless perchance the bridge was out. And so San Miguel remained as it had started, a frontier town. After three years the railroad company decided a bridge was definitely not the solution to their troubles. A representative of Martin & Ranger, tunnel builders, conferred with the railroad company. And the following spring the sand hogs descended upon San Miguel like an avalanche.

The town had been tough. The town had been hard. It was used to rough men, but never in its three years of existence had it seen anything like the sand hogs. The bridge builders left, turning the town over with a parting free-for-all to the invading tunnel men.

Within a month a shaft had been sunk close to the water's edge. And on the surface of the Rio Blanco Diablo a foaming patch of white water crept slowly away from the bank. Its progress was slow but inexorable. There was no stopping this leaping column of air in its journey across the river. And the half-breed population of San Miguel looked upon it with awe—wondering if the time would come when the Rio Blanco would sweep it away to destruction.

Directly below it down through sixty feet of surging water and forty feet of river bed the sand hogs drove tunnel. Each day they sent the iron shell of the tube a few feet further on its journey to the far bank. They passed the center, dipped below the narrow channel and drove on toward the opposite side. They were hungry for victory. The river had sent the bridge builders away in defeat. But the sand hogs were winning—they were driving tunnel. And in this dank battle field

beneath the river, Blaster drove his gang of sand hogs.

He might have had another name once. But nobody remembered it. Nobody seemed to care much. On the company records his name was Blaster. Even his union book carried the name Blaster. He never got any mail. And to the men on the job he was "Blaster, the best damn heading boss in the business."

HE stood in the face, the forward part of the tunnel, and watched the miners. Stripped to the waist, plastered with river mud, the muscles of his back writhing as he moved, he seemed a giant ape weaving and bobbing beneath the fitful gleams of the tunnel lights. His arms were huge, his wrists were thick and his hands, doubled into fists, swung like sledges. A ragged felt hat was tipped forward at a crazy angle across his left eye. He lifted a giant paw and snatched the hat from his head and brought it down with a resounding thump upon the naked back of a miner close to him.

"You're getting slow, Mutt," he said. "Think I'll have to ship you back to the States."

The man who turned to face Blaster had been christened Monroe Jackson. But this had been too much of a mouthful for the huge heading boss. Ten years ago Jackson had gone to work in Blaster's gang. At that time Blaster decided Mutt was a better name for a tunnel man than Monroe. There had been a fight. And Monroe had been knocked down five times by Blaster. The fifth time he had stayed down, not willingly but necessarily. Monroe Jackson had been knocked out. And when he came to he was just plain Mutt. But during the fight he had

broken Blaster's nose. No one else had been able to do this, and as a result Blaster and Mutt were pals.

"When I go slow," said Mutt, "there's a reason. These here rivers in South America ain't exactly push-overs. This sand is like flour. And the closer we get to the bank, the worse it gets."

"Look here, Mutt. I been hearing about that sand every day for the past week. I know it's bad. But it ain't any worse than the stuff we hit in Belgium. Come on—dig into it. We'll be through with this job in a week. And then back to the States for us."

"Ah, I tell you, we neer more air, Blaster. This stuff is too wet."

There were forty pounds of compressed air billowing against the forward part of the tunnel. And it was this air that kept out the river. Standing before a wall of boards that braced the face, the miners worked swiftly but carefully, advancing the tube. Above their heads a circular hood of steel arched forward from the shield, a partial protection against the many tons of sand and water above them. The shield was a hollow steel bracelet that fitted closely around the forward end of the tunnel and moved slowly into the river bed.

As the shield moved ahead, concentric rings of iron were added to the completed portion of the tube and step by step the tunnel forged on. Each step had driven it deeper below the surface of the river. And the deeper it went, the more air was needed to keep the Rio Blanco Diablo from pouring in upon the sand hogs. Compressed air—a bodyless, intangible something that could not be seen or felt—that was all these tunnel builders had to hold back the river. It was only natural they should want the pressure

as high as possible. But in that lay danger, and Blaster knew it.

"A few more pounds of air in here," he said, "and we'd blow the face out. You'd have the river in your lap then, Mutt."

"Always thinkin' about something cheerful, ain't you," grunted Mutt, as he swung his shovel. "Suppose you go on back into the heading and put a little pep into those muckers. I'll take care of the mining and I don't need any barrel-headed old walrus shouting orders down my neck."

BLASTER stepped forward, jammed the hat back over his eye and dug a stubby thumb into Mutt's ribs.

"Don't you go giving orders around here, Mutt," he said. "Remember—I'm the heading boss in this gang."

"Aw, go to hell," said Mutt. And his shovel cut deeply into the sand.

The other miners and their helpers took no notice of this interchange between the heading boss and Mutt. In fact, their work seemed to demand their utmost attention. But there were sly grins on their faces, and Brick Murphy, the miner in the right pocket, choked as he tried to reclaim a cud of tobacco half way down his throat. He gave up at last, and swallowed it.

"What you laughing at?" roared Blaster. He grabbed Murphy by the shoulder and spun him around.

"Nothing," said Murphy. "Absolutely nothing."

"I agree with you," said Mutt.

This had been going on for years. The sand hogs knew, and accepted Blaster's driving methods. He cursed them, roared at them, fought them, and beat them. He drove them until their bodies ran with sweat. He was the toughest heading boss ever to step

into a tunnel. And the men gloried in it and accepted it as right—all except Mutt.

Blaster's practical jokes were legend amongst the sand hogs. They were rough jokes. Sometimes they were cruel jokes. But they were the sort of humor the sand hogs understood. When Blaster poured cement into Mutt's boots and set them out in the sun to harden, the sand hogs howled—all except Mutt. And he swung one boot in the general direction of Blaster's ear that put the heading boss to sleep for a half hour. There had been no fight when Blaster regained consciousness. He merely looked at his friend with a sorrowful expression as though at a loss to understand why Mutt could not appreciate such rare humor.

In the heading, the sand hogs accepted Blaster's every order without question. Mutt questioned all his orders without exception. But Blaster wouldn't work on a job unless Mutt was the center pocket miner. And Mutt had been known to lay off for three months while Blaster was in the hospital with a broken leg.

The heading boss started through the center pocket that led back through the shield into the tunnel proper. He paused, watched Mutt's swaying shoulders for a moment, then lifted a piece of mud and threw it at the miner's head.

"Ain't mad, are ya, Mutt?" he asked.

There was no answer and Blaster shook his head dolefully as he turned and lurched through the pocket. Before him the wooden working platform hung suspended from the center line of the tunnel. It provided a place for the iron gang to work as they bolted together the iron segments

forming the tube being driven beneath the river. They were Negroes, these men of the iron gang. Tall, muscular blacks who had followed Blaster to this little town of San Miguel.

They, like other sand hogs, were drifters. All over the United States, up through Canada, Europe and now down into South America these ebony giants had followed and worked for Blaster. They were part of his gang, a gang of adventuring laborers—soldiers of fortune in the battalion of labor. They watched Blaster carefully as he stepped onto the platform, always ready for some rough prank and equally ready to anticipate his orders.

HE climbed down from the platform onto the tunnel floor. Here the muckers swung their shovels in ceaseless cadence, filling the cars with sand from the reeking bed of the Rio Blanco Diablo. Most of them were Irish, some were Scots, all were followers of Blaster. He watched them for a moment offering a word of advice to some and jesting with others.

"This stuff is pretty wet, Blaster," said Scotty McLean. The mucker had lifted a handful of sand from the pile and was sifting it between his fingers. "Do you think we've got enough air on here?"

"You're getting as bad as Mutt," answered Blaster. "Always hollering for more air. There's forty pounds on here now and that's all the charts call for."

"I don't know nothing about the charts," said Scotty. "All I know is there's too much water in them bottom pockets."

Blaster knew the man was right. For the past twenty minutes he had noticed the water creeping up in the lower portion of the face. At first he

had thought the air pressure might be dropping a little.

Pressure is never constant in a tunnel. It raises a little, then drops, but never does it vary more than a pound. For a pound of air will hold back approximately two feet of water. The exact amount is that every foot in height of water exerts a pressure of 0.434 per square inch but Blaster liked round numbers. If the surface of the river was eighty feet above the tunnel he wanted forty pounds of air pressure. And that was where the surface had been when he brought his gang into the tunnel.

He glanced at the air gauge suspended beneath the platform. The pointer hovered between forty and forty-one. He looked into the bottom pocket. The water was bringing the sand to life. Slowly, persistently, the brown particles were sliding forward. Something was wrong and Blaster headed for the field telephone that hung beside the air gauge. As he reached for the receiver a cry sounded along the iron shell of the tunnel. "*Dry boots!*"

The shift was over. A new gang had come into the heading to relieve Blaster's men. And they had announced their presence with the time-honored cry of the sand hog. Blaster's men had been wading in the muck of the river bed and were covered with filth. But the newcomers were clean and their boots were dry, and these "dry boots" had become the symbol for all relieving gangs.

The miners climbed into the pockets of the shield, the iron men took the wrenches from the hands of Blaster's tired Negroes and the muckers crouched above the muck pile. Jim Savage, the heading boss, glanced quickly at the wet sand in the bottom

and a worried look came into his eyes.

"We're goin' to catch hell this shift," he said. "Guess we'll need more air."

"What's wrong?" asked Blaster.

"The river's lifting. Must be up two feet or more. And there's a rain storm bangin' away up there that beats anything I've ever seen."

"Aw, that ain't nothing to worry about," said Blaster. "A couple of pounds of air will take care of the river. As for the rain, well—"

"Blaster'll stop that as soon as we go up," said Mutt, who had joined them. "He's good at turnin' off rain storms."

"Do you hear him, Savage?" asked Blaster. "That's the kind of stuff I get all day." He turned and threw a lump of mud at Mutt's head. "Come on, Hard Luck—let's go up and play in the rain."

THEY followed the gang along the misty reaches of the tube and Blaster caught Mutt by the arm, slowing his steps to keep a few paces behind the men.

"There wasn't any use of worrying Savage," he said to the lanky miner. "But that rain is going to cause plenty of trouble."

"How do you figure that?"

"They been gettin' a lot of it up in the hills and the Rio Blanco is lifting every day. I was talkin' to some of the half-breeds and they got some kind of a crazy idea about the river bein' mad at us. The way they figure it, the old Rio Blanco ain't never been licked. It chased the bridge builders out of town and now it's cookin' up trouble for us."

"That's the bunk," said Mutt. "Are you gettin' dumb enough to listen to a bunch of half-caste spicks?"

"Not exactly—but the way they keep yappin' about the Rain God and the River God and all that sort of stuff—oh, I don't know, but they seem too damn sure about it all," Blaster said.

"Get into the lock," said Mutt disgustedly. "I'll tell you a story about Little Red Riding Hood. That ought to make you happy."

Before them the circumference of the tunnel was blocked by a concrete bulkhead. Through this heavy partition extended the air locks, the only means of passing from the pressure-filled tube to the normal air of the shaft. There were three—the muck lock, a huge steel cylinder through which the small iron cars carried their moist loads of river sand from the heading—the man lock, another cylinder six feet in diameter through which the gangs of sand hogs passed on their way to and from the tunnel—and above, centered against the arch of the bore was the emergency lock. This lock was smaller. So small that a man had to enter it on his hands and knees. But no sand hog had ever complained of the size of the emergency lock—it was only used when the river had burst into the tunnel and sent the men in headlong flight from the heading.

The gang filed into the main lock. Blaster closed the door and the lock tender reached for the exhaust valve. With the release of pressure the lock was drenched in a blinding fog of condensation. The finger of the gauge dropped swiftly to twenty pounds, then stopped as the lock tender closed the valve to a hair line crack. For the next forty minutes the air whispered through the exhaust and the sand hogs played cards to while away the time of decompression.

At length the gauge pointer rested

at zero. Blaster wrenched at the handle of the door, swung it open and hurried to the waiting elevator that stood at the foot of the shaft. The gang piled on behind him and the car shot upward from the depths.

AS it cleared the surface a sheet of tropical rain whipped in through the open face of the cage and drenched the men of the gang.

"Ain't this nice?" said Blaster disgustedly as the car stopped.

He lurched onto the gantry, a stout wooden platform erected above the shaft as a landing place for the materials used in the tunnel. Groping his way to the edge, he blinked, pawing at his eyes with one huge fist. Mutt joined him and the gang turned the collars of their jackets high about their throats and ran to the stairs.

As the two men stood silently watching the downpour they were joined by a third. He was tall, heavy shouldered and his jaw protruded at an aggressive angle. Harry Carter, general superintendent of the San Miguel job, was worried, and he expressed his opinion of the river and rain in no uncertain terms.

"And if this confounded rain keeps on for a while longer," he said, "we might just as well pack our bags and go home."

"Never saw the river we couldn't lick," protested Blaster. "The Rio Blanco ain't any tougher than some we tackled."

"Oh, it's not just the river," said Carter. "It's the labor. The breeds are talking and whispering like a bunch of old women. And one fellow by the name of Lopez has predicted the river will carry away the town."

"Yeah?" grunted Blaster. "I think I know that bird. He's foreman of

that bunch down at the concrete yard, ain't he?"

"That's the man."

"Okay," said the giant heading boss, and turned to his partner. "Come on, Mutt. I'm goin' down and have a little talk with Lopez."

"Don't do that, Blaster," ordered Carter. "It will only cause trouble. You and Mutt hustle along to your room and grab a few hours' sleep. You'll be working in high air if this water keeps rising."

"Won't be able to keep it out of the shaft if it gets much higher," said Mutt. "The mouth of that shaft should be ten feet above high water level. But by the looks of it, now, it isn't over five feet above the river."

"I know it," said Carter. "We checked back over twenty years before we started work here and the records show it has never come within five feet of where it is now. So I'm not taking any chances. I'm having the laborers

Mutt started for the stairs. "Call us if you need help."

CHAPTER II.

SAN MIGUEL.

THE town of San Miguel was built upon a neck of land that jutted out from the north bank of the river. Its one main street ran parallel with the waterfront, and as a result the street started and ended at each bend of the river. The first group of bridge builders to be employed by the railroad had been New Yorkers, and they had promptly named the main street Broadway. The intersecting streets, which were little more than alleys, had been numbered.

The gantry, standing near the site of a bridge pier, was directly in the center of town. And this street had been called Forty-second Street. To the east, the town extended as far as Thirtieth Street—to the west, Fifty-first Street edged the river. To be exact, it *had* edged the river, but at present the river was covering Forty-eighth Street and would soon reach Forty-seventh.

As Blaster and Mutt splashed through the ankle-deep mud of Forty-second Street, they paused for a moment to watch a gang of laborers placing bags of cement around the shaft. The breeds were going about their work with a visible reluctance and their eyes turned constantly in the direction of the river. At times they stopped and whispered. And Blaster noticed that one man among them was more emphatic in his gestures and his talk than any of the others.

"That's Lopez," he said to Mutt. "He's the guy that's got those breeds licked. I better have a talk with him."



BLASTER

erect a dam around the shaft and when that's finished the river can lift as high as it wants."

"Good idea," said Blaster as he and

"You had that idea a minute ago and Carter said it was no good," said Mutt. "Why don't you forget it and let's go to bed?"

"Aw, it won't take a minute," said Blaster.

He shouldered his way through the group of laborers and stopped before Lopez. The breed was balancing a bag of cement upon one shoulder and when Blaster caught him by the arm he dropped the bag into the mud.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I don't want a thing, Lopez," said Blaster. "I'm just going to give you a little advice. Now you can take it or leave it, just as you want. But if you're a smart guy, you'll take it."

"I don't know what is this talk," said Lopez.

"No? Well, get this. You're a pretty wise hombre, Lopez. You worked on all the bridge jobs and now you got a nice place on this tunnel job. You figure we'll be through in a couple of weeks and you'll be out of work. So you're going to fix things so you'll get another one. Ain't that right?"

"I do not know what you say," protested the breed, but his eyes narrowed to an angry line.

"Well—maybe I'm wrong," said Blaster. "But here's a sample of what's coming to you if you don't stop being a wise guy."

BLASTER'S left hand shot forward and caught Lopez upon the point of the chin. The right lifted, swung in a short hook and landed just below the breed's left ear. Lopez slumped to the ground and stretched full length in the mud.

"Come on! Snap into it, you geese!" yelled Blaster to the astonished laborers. "Quit talkin' and get a little work done around here!"

"You're a great help," said Mutt. "You just go around scatterin' good deeds all over the place. Come on! Let's get out of here before the breeds decide to take you apart."

"Aw, I could take on a dozen of them," protested Blaster.

"Sure! But there's about fifty of them, so let's get goin'! Besides, I need a drink."

"That's the first good idea you've had to day," said Blaster and started off through the mud.

San Miguel had shrunk to half its former size, but Broadway and Forty-second Street still remained, and it was to this point Blaster and Mutt headed. Their destination was a two-story wooden building upon the front of which hung a battered tin sign with the words "Elite House" painted in two foot letters of black. Below, in smaller type, were the words "Charlotte Thomas."

"Do you think Lottie's still here?" asked Mutt.

"Sure," said Blaster, "she'd stick. It'd take more than a river to run Lottie out of town. You know, Mutt, I've been thinking very seriously about Lottie."

"What with?"

"Now be nice; I'm serious, I tell you. She's a good scout and this is a lousy town for her to be stuck in. I wonder why she's here."

"That's her business. As far as I'm concerned I don't care why she's here. She runs a first-rate restaurant and she doesn't charge you more than twice what a drink is worth—outside of that *her* business is *her* business. Besides, it's the only place in town that hasn't got bedbugs."

"Aw, there you go, Mutt, only thinkin' about material things! Haven't you got a soul?"

"Kiss me," sighed Mutt, "I'm beginning to love you."

"I'll sock you in the nose if you don't quit clownin'," said Blaster. "What I mean is—what's keepin' her in this flea-bitten town, and why don't she ever take a vacation back to the States?"

"Ask her," said Mutt, as he opened the door, "and you'll probably get your head broke."

They stepped into a large room that served as a combination lobby and bar of Lottie's makeshift hotel. To the right, off the door, a packing case counter held a registry book, inkstand and key rack. Tables were scattered about the floor and on them back number magazines and ancient newspapers were piled in disorderly array. Huge brass cuspidors were placed conveniently within the range of each chair. Across the back of the room extended a full length bar. And this bar was the pride and glory of San Miguel.

IT had been presented to Lottie by the sand hogs. These men were serious drinkers and they appreciated the quality of liquor served by the genial hostess of the Elite House. For a time they had been content with the rough plank bar used by the preceding bridge builders. But within a few months there had come a sense of lack—something was missing. And Blaster had discovered the reason. They needed a bar—a good bar—a bar equal to that of any in the country.

A meeting had been called at the bunk house, a plan of action formulated, and for the next month a twenty per cent kitty had been levied upon all card and dice games. This automatically made each man a generous sharer in the gift, for the sand hog does not live who would not risk his

last dollar upon the turn of a card. And at the end of the month an order was sent to Buenos Aires for a bar.

Now it stood in all its scintillating glory across the rear of the room. And presiding over this vast expanse of polished mahogany was a diminutive Englishman. The top button of his dirty khaki shirt cleared the inner rail by less than two inches. His shoulders were no wider than the distance between two of the brass beer taps. And the hands that twisted a towel round and round in the whisky glasses seemed less substantial than the fragile crystal they cleaned.

Harvey Willets was a "typical tropical tramp." No phrase ever coined described a man more surely. The words seemed wreathed in the lazy smile that twisted his face and set his ears to dancing. The sun of the tropics, aided by the potent rye of Lottie's private stock, had drained the lustre from his eyes. His hair was straw-colored and plastered flat across his forehead. His neck was lean and dirty, save when Lottie grasped him firmly by the collar and headed him for the bath tub. It seemed even thinner when he emerged, hitching his belt to the last notch and stuffing a ragged shirt into his trouser tops. And his hands appeared to have attained a degree of translucency—a delicate, parchment-like beauty that added a touch of incongruity to the man.

"It was my misfortune to have been born a gentleman," he often said in that faint drawl so out of place in San Miguel. "But I've done my best to live it down. Jove—I've almost succeeded."

He would smile then, and his eyes would glaze as he drummed a gentle tattoo upon the shiny bar. And from an easy chair in the far corner of the

room Lottie Thomas would watch those fingers. A grimness would settle upon her features and sometimes she sighed.

LOTTIE was neither young nor old. Nor was she middle-aged. At times she was any one of these. At others all three. But she was a woman—*all woman*—a vibrant, vital female personality. She was beautiful—not that it mattered. For Lottie would have been attractive to men even without the fine regularity of features that stamped her as beautiful. Her voice was low, throaty. And at times it throbbed. Her eyes were a blue that sometimes turned a slatey gray. At such times even Blaster walked lightly and lowered his voice. And her hair was a golden brown—braided and twisted to a knot at the back of her head.

Where she came from, no one knew. Some had asked and a slow smile had been the answer. Nor did any one know why she was in San Miguel nor when she had come there. The bridge builders had come to her place to eat and drink, and as the American dollars passed over the bar, Lottie's hotel had grown. The fixtures had changed—the quality of the liquor had changed—many things had changed—but not Lottie.

The sand hogs respected her because she demanded respect. But they were rough men and their ways were rough. There had been a time when they first came to town that some of them would have treated her lightly. But Lottie's tongue had ripped curses at them that burned. And a heavy beer mug had put a dent in Scotty McLean's nose that would last indefinitely. Now Scotty was her pal. He swore the day would come when she would be

Mrs. McLean. Lottie grinned and dismissed his protestations of love with a wave of her hand.

She liked Mutt. And the lanky miner enjoyed more of her confidence than any man on the job. It may have been because they both took a great degree of pleasure in baiting Blaster. It may have been that both were overly fond of Blaster. If such were the case, no one but Lottie knew it. And she would have been the first to deny it—even to herself.

She joined them at the bar and bought the first round. This was unusual.

"What's the idea?" asked Blaster in surprise.

"The house always sets 'em up for the losers," answered Lottie. "Provided they put up a good fight. And you boys certainly did that."

"Huh?" grunted Blaster. "What do you mean—losers?"

"You're licked, Blaster. Even if you don't know it, the Rio Blanco has won again. I thought you sand hogs would win, but it just isn't in the cards."

"Now, don't say that, Lottie," protested Blaster. "What ever made you think a little rain would chase us out of town?"

"I've heard three sets of bridge builders talk that way," said Lottie. "But the Rio Blanco licked them. It's a tough little river and it always wins. But don't think it's doing me any favors. If that tunnel went through I could retire and live like a queen. This town would really amount to something then, and I own enough property around here to fix things very nicely for Lottie."

"Do you really think this two-bit brook is going to stop us?" asked Mutt.

"Stop you?" said Harvey. "It will

jolly well twist you up in knots, me lads. I expect to see the lot of you scampering back to the States in a week, no less."

"You do, eh?" said Blaster. "Well, Harvey, just in case I forget to say good-by, put it there, old kid."

HE extended a hamlike hand across the bar and Harvey slipped his own graceful fingers into the huge paw. Blaster's fingers contracted.

"Something to remember me by," he said and squeezed harder. The veins leaped out upon the little Englishman's forehead. He writhed and a faint bleat came from between his teeth.

Lottie had been standing a good six feet from Blaster when he grasped Harvey's hand. She covered the distance in a single leap. Her fists beat a steady drumfire against the heading boss's chin. He released the bartender and staggered backward. Amazement was strong upon his face.

"Nix, Lottie!" he cried. "I ain't hurtin' him."

"Let go of his hand—you fool!" she yelled. "If you do that again, I'll—"

"Take it easy, Lottie," said Mutt mildly, as he stepped to her side. "What's all the excitement?"

"His hands—Blaster mustn't hurt them. No one must hurt them. They're the only damn thing about him that's any good—and they've got to stay that way."

"Why, Lottie, if you had told me," stammered Blaster. "I'd have—I mean—aw, how was I to know?"

"Want to tell us about it, Lottie?" asked Mutt.

"No, I don't," she said. "Let's forget it."

"You're mad at me, eh, Lottie?"

said Blaster. "Mad at me for something I didn't mean to do. And you won't tell me why."

"Maybe I will," she said. And there was a trace of a smile upon her lips. It was a soft smile, different from those she used as a rule. And it added a touch of melancholy to her features. "Long as there's just you two here—I guess it's all right."

"You see"—she started—"Harvey has been with me for ten years. When he's sober he's a good bartender. But that ain't often. And I'd have kicked him out a week after he started working for me except for one thing. And that's his hands."

"But what's his hands got to do with it?" blurted the giant heading boss.

"Shut up," snapped Mutt."

"Plenty," said Lottie. "Plenty to do with it. Those hands talk to my son for me. Yeah—I got a son. He's a swell kid—and big, too. I got him back in the States in a military school. Haven't seen him in ten years. And Lord knows when I will!"

HER voice broke off and she toyed with the empty whisky glass, sliding it back and forth between her hands, staring at it, silent.

"Gee, Lottie," said Blaster. "That's news to me. I never would have guessed it."

"Mutt knew it," said Lottie, still looking down into her glass. "He caught me looking at the kid's picture one day. Thought I didn't notice him when he turned his head and walked away. But I did. And I like you for not being too damn curious, Mutt."

"Thanks, Lottie," said Mutt.

"It must be great to have a kid," said Blaster as he reached for the bottle of rye. "Wish I had one. I'd make

him the best damn tunnel man in the business—teach him all I know—see that he didn't make any mistakes, and he'd be a super in no time."

"Would you?" said Lottie very gently. "Would you want him down there under the river with only an even chance of coming out alive? Would you want him gambling, drinking, fighting—killing men with his hands? Would you want that, Blaster?"

"Maybe not," said Blaster. "I'd want him to have—"

"You'd want him to have everything in the world," she interrupted. "You'd want him to be all the things you can never hope to be. You wouldn't let him drink because that's what kept you a heading boss. You've plenty of brains, Blaster—plenty of them. But you like to drink and you like to fight and it's kept you from reaching the top. You'd never let your kid do that."

"No," mused Blaster. "I guess I wouldn't."

"Well, it's the same with me," said Lottie. "I want my kid to have a chance. I want him to be a gentleman—a *gentleman*—do you understand? He's going to have an education—meet nice people—the kind of people Harvey used to know before he became a bum. He's goin' to talk their language, live the way they do. He's goin' to like it. And he's never goin' to know there's a joint in the world like San Miguel."

"That's swell, Lottie," said Blaster. "But where does Harvey fit in? What's he got to do with it?"

"None of your business," grunted Mutt. "Blaster, don't you ever get sick of asking questions?"

"That's all right, Mutt," said Lottie.

"Somehow or other I'd like you two fellows to know about it. It's a screwy story—maybe you'll laugh when you hear it—maybe you won't. It's all so tangled up now that I don't know whether to laugh or cry myself when I think about it. It's like I was tryin' to play



CHARLOTTE THOMAS

God, and got hurt.

"You see—I was a singer. Not good, not bad, just so-so. And I was workin' in a night club on Broadway when New York was goin' strong. We used to work around the tables then—you know, walk up to the chumps and sing songs to them. And I was doing that when I met Tommy's father."

"That's a great name for a kid, Tommy Thomas," said Blaster.

"That ain't his name," said Lottie. "Thomas is just a name I use now. His father was Thomas Carington."

BLASTER blinked. One huge paw scratched reminiscently at the base of his skull. He opened his mouth, tried to speak, then closed it again. He reached for Lottie's hand, caught her fingers tightly within his own and squeezed. Then he grinned.

"I always knew that guy needed

killing," he said. "I remember when I first read about it in the papers. Why, I think I even told Mutt at the time. I said, 'Mutt, any guy that would do a trick like that sure got what was comin' to him.' So help me, Lottie, that's just what I said."

"Thanks for the lie, Blaster," said Lottie. "But I didn't kill Tommy's father. The papers pinned it on me, and the courts would have convicted me if I'd stayed in New York. It looked like an open and shut case, and I don't blame them. But I didn't do it."

"We'd only been married a few months and he came home drunk with a bunch of his friends. He had a sheet of music in his pocket and he put it on the piano. Then he asked me to sing it. I told him I didn't know it and he kept insisting that I read the words. He knew I couldn't—knew I'd never learned to read and write—and he was laughing at me, making fun of me in front of his friends. Told 'em he'd found me in a night club and that I'd be something new in society—a wife of the socially prominent Carington family who couldn't read."

"I cursed him—plenty. Then I ran into my bedroom and he followed me, laughing. I threw a vase at him and he dodged it and fell. His head smashed into the radiator and he died. The newspapers called me the Tiger Girl and I was licked."

"Maybe you shouldn't have run away, Lottie," said Blaster. "You might have beat the case."

"Don't be a chump," growled Mutt. "What chance would she have stood?"

"Oh, I'd have stuck it out if—" a twisted smile finished Lottie's train of thought.

"And Harvey writes to your kid for you?" asked Blaster.

"Sure he does," said Lottie. "He writes beautiful letters and says all the things I want to say to Tommy. But he uses language I can't speak. And then he reads me the answers. Tommy's big now—he writes every two weeks."

"Don't he ever ask what you're doin' down here?" said Blaster, and Mutt kicked him violently in the shin. He winced, shook his head and looked at Lottie. "Forget it—I'm always askin' dumb questions."

"That's not a dumb question," she said. "It's the thing that's been driving me crazy. I told you I was trying to play God—and I'm all twisted up. I told Harvey to write that I was running a plantation up in the rubber country. That worked for a while. Now Tommy wants to come home during his vacation. What am I going to do? He mustn't see me—he mustn't hear me talk—know what I am—"

"Can't you just write and say no?" mumbled Blaster.

"You're great help!" said Mutt.

CHAPTER III.

"HOPELESS!"

THE door opened just then and a group of sand hogs filed up to the bar. Savage, the heading boss who had relieved Blaster in the tunnel, was in the lead. He was drenched with rain and his rough working clothes were plastered with mud. His jaws were clamped tight and he spun a silver dollar across the bar in evident disgust.

"Gimme some rye!" he ordered.

"What t'hell you doin' here?" asked Blaster in astonishment. "Why ain't you down in the heading?"

"The heading's gone!" growled

Savage. "Or it will be in less than an hour. Carter ordered us out. Said he couldn't keep the river out of the shaft and didn't want us trapped down there."

"Ordered you out!" roared Blaster.

"There goes your blessed old tunnel," laughed Harvey.

"Shut up, Harvey," said Lottie. "I'm sick of saving your skin." She turned to Blaster and put her hand upon his shoulder. "Don't let it get you down, Big Fellow. You're not the first one to lose to the Rio Blanco."

"Who says I lost?" yelled Blaster. "There ain't no damn river on earth can lick the sand hogs. Carter must be gettin' old or something. And you too, Savage—what's the idea of pullin' a yellow trick like that?"

"Don't call me yellow!" barked Savage. "I came out when I was told to! If Carter hadn't ordered me out I'd still be there and you know it. And if you think I'm lying, say so!"

"I got no time to beat you up now, Savage!" roared Blaster and headed for the door. "Come on, Mutt! You and me are going to do a little sand hogging!"

Mutt's dour features twisted into a smile as he plunged through the door behind Blaster. He raced through the rain-swept streets behind the huge heading boss and followed him up the steps of the gantry. As they crossed the platform toward the small shanty that housed the superintendent's quarters, Blaster suddenly stopped.

"Get the gang!" he ordered. "Don't ask questions, Mutt—not now. Just round up the gang and have 'em here in five minutes."

"You're screwy as hell," said Mutt, as he turned toward the stairs. "But somehow I like you—you big egg."

Blaster wrenched open the door of

Carter's office and faced the superintendent.

"What's the matter, Carter—you goin' crazy?" roared the heading boss.

"What's the idea of ordering Savage out of the tunnel?"

"Hold it, Blaster. You don't know what we're up against. Take a good look at the river—then I think you'll agree with me."

Blaster shielded his eyes from the rain and turned toward the river. The leaden expanse of water was spreading steadily farther inland. Twisting, snake-like arms of water were reaching up the streets toward the shaft and the houses nearer the river were completely surrounded. As Blaster watched, a wooden building swept loose from its foundation and careened madly down the Rio Blanco Diablo. Cursing men were piling household belongings into ramshackle cars. Others were lashing blankets and duffel bags across the backs of mules. Women were streaming through Forty-second Street on their way to the mainland and a general exodus from the town had begun.

Most of them were half-breeds; laborers who had brought their families with them when employed on the various construction jobs. Some were Americans, others had come from Brazil and the Argentine. All of them were leaving San Miguel, splashing along in the ankle deep mud of the roads.

"You see, Blaster," said Carter. "It's hopeless. We can't stop them."

THERE was a note of resignation in his voice. It sounded like that of a man who had battled hard in a hopeless cause and had at last accepted inevitable defeat. He was dressed, as was the heading boss, in

ragged khaki working clothes. They were rain drenched, his hat was gone and his hair was plastered to his head in a sodden mass.

"When did this start?" asked Blaster.

"Just after you left. The breeds quit work, ran to their homes and now they're leaving the town. We're licked."

"Like hell we are!" roared Blaster. "I started this when I socked Lopez. All right—I'll finish it. Where's the other sand hogs?"

"I told them to clear out when I sent for Savage. There's a few at the boiler room trying to keep up steam. We had to keep those compressors turning while Savage and his men were down below. But I'm going to call them off now."

"You mean *all* the top labor has quit on you?"

"All gone—all except the hogs. Of course the engineer is still at the power house and Paddy Mullens is down at the boiler room. But all the laborers are gone. They're breeds, all we could get in this two-bit town. And they're running."

"If we could finish that dam around the shaft we could save the tunnel," said Blaster. "The river can't come up more than another few feet."

"Where are you going to get the men to do it?"

"I'll get 'em!" yelled the heading boss, and turned as the pounding of boots announced Mutt and Blaster's gang. Blaster stepped forward to meet them. "Good work, Mutt. Got 'em all?"

"Yeah," said Mutt.

"Listen, you guys," said Blaster, addressing his men. "The breeds ran out on us. The river's lifting and maybe it'll be pouring down the shaft in

a few minutes. But someone's got to stick it out in the heading, and make that face solid or the tunnel's a goner. How many of you want to go down below with Mutt and take a chance on me stopping the river?"

There was a rumble of laughter from the men as they turned and headed for the cages. But Blaster stopped them with a shout.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "Don't kid yourselves that this is goin' to be a picnic. If I *don't* stop the river, the shaft will flood and that means you birds will be trapped in the tunnel. You understand?"

"Stop makin' speeches and get to work," said Mutt, and he signaled to the engineer to lower the cage. As the faces of the men disappeared below the gantry floor, Carter spoke.

"They may be going to their death, Blaster," he said. "I don't know what you intend to do, but it's up to you now."

THE word had spread that Blaster's gang had gone back to work and men of the other gangs came splashing through rain-swept streets in search of information. In their lead was Savage, and he stamped across the gantry, his eyes ablaze with anger.

"What's the idea, Carter?" he demanded. "Why did you order us out and let Blaster's men go down?"

"I didn't send them down," said Carter. "They went of their own accord."

"Sure they did," roared Blaster. "My men are sand hogs—not gandy dancers. They're going to hold that heading while you guys finish the dam around the shaft."

"There ain't enough of us," said Savage. "We need about *fifty* more men—maybe a hundred."

"There's enough of you to start it," said Blaster. "And I'll get the rest."

Blaster stamped across the gantry. He took the steps two at a time and hurried toward a building located a few hundred feet from the shaft. It was painted a flaring red and a heavy padlock held the door closed. Seizing a pick from a near-by pile of tools, Blaster made short work of the lock and stepped in out of the rain.

Before him boxes of dynamite were piled in orderly array upon the floor. From the nearest he lifted three sticks and stuffed them into a pocket of his sheepskin coat. A fourth, he cut into quarters. He lifted a handful of exploders from another box and inserted one in each piece of dynamite. Moving quickly, he crimped in short fuses, smiling as he worked, then hurried from the building.

The smile became a decided grin as he splashed along toward the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street. This was going to be a great joke, he thought. Even Mutt would have to laugh at it. For the half-breed population of San Miguel had never quite understood Blaster's name. Some had called him Blister, and upon waking up an hour or two later had decided they had made a mistake.

"Those babies want to know where I got the name, eh?" he mumbled. "Wonder what they'll think when they find out."

A battered car churned the mud into dirty spray as it splashed toward the heading boss. It was loaded with eight men, all of whom had been laborers in the employ of Martin & Ranger. The driver jammed at the horn button—he yelled and waved his arms at the figure that blocked the street. But Blaster did not move an inch. Perforce the car stopped.

"What's the hurry?" asked Blaster.

"The river come," said the driver. "We go."

"Now I ain't got time to argue," said the heading boss. "So just turn that car around and head for the boiler room."

"No. We go away!"

"If you do, you'll take a little present with you from Blaster."

HE had been lighting a cigarette as he spoke, shielding the flame from the rain with his cupped hands. One of these huge hands slipped into the jacket pocket, and the eyes of the laborers widened as it was withdrawn with a quarter stick of dynamite. Blaster touched the tip of his cigarette to the short fuse and hurled the dynamite far down a deserted street.

A volcano of mud erupted where it hit, and the reverberations of the explosion danced from the wooden building fronts.

"That's nice timing, ain't it?" asked Blaster innocently. "And I bet you I can drop one right in your back seat at a hundred feet."

"You would kill us?" said the driver.

"Why not?" laughed Blaster. "Come on, now—I got no more time to argue. Head this car for the boiler room or I'll blast it there."

There was a hurried exchange of Spanish between the occupants and as Blaster stepped onto the running board, the car swung north to the boiler room. He herded his men in through the door when they reached the sheet iron building and they were greeted by wild shouts from the laboring sand hogs.

"What you got with you?" demanded Paddy Mullens, the engineer.

"Recruits," said Blaster. "They were bashful, but I persuaded them."

"Sure, I think I heard the argument," laughed Paddy. "But divil a bit of good will they be now. There's not a spot of coal left in the place. The half-breed heathens wouldn't cart any from the railroad yard when the rain started. Now the roads are too bad to get a truck through."

Blaster looked at the sand hogs. The tunnel builders were a sorry sight, grouped about the doors of the furnaces. They were stripped to the waist, the upper portion of their bodies smeared with sweat, rain and coal dust. Their boots squirted water as they moved and their legs were caked with mud. All of them were in the last stages of exhaustion, but there was a look of grim resolve upon each face as they stared at Blaster.

Feeding the fires had been simple work to these masters of the shovel. But when the coal in the boiler room was gone they had tried to augment the supply by hurried trips to the railroad yards. Time and again each man had staggered through the sodden roads, laden with two cement bags full of the precious coal. As fast as they brought it to the boiler room it had been thrown into the fires.

The giant compressors that sent the air hurtling down through pipes that led to the heading needed steam to keep them turning—high pressure steam. These two boilers had to supply that steam. If the steam failed the air failed. And with no air to hold it back, the Rio Blanco Diablo would surge into the tunnel.

BLASTER'S gang was down there, fighting the river, refusing to quit. Even now, they were bracing the wooden bulkhead with planks

and bags of cement, doing their utmost to stop the onrush of the sand as the air lowered. Mutt was probably up to his waist in mud now, thought Blaster. Yes, and he'd stay there until the damn river drowned him—trusting to the last that Blaster would send him the air he needed.

It was useless to attempt to feed the fires with coal. The men couldn't haul it fast enough. Even with the additional help that had been brought by the heading boss. Blaster knew that.

"T'hell with the coal," he said. "We'll use wood."

"And where do we get it?" asked Paddy.

"Watch!" answered Blaster. He stepped to the door and motioned to one of the sand hogs. "Jump across the street and see if that building is empty. And hurry back, Harry."

Harry Bates raced through the mud, made a cursory survey of the building and returned, shaking his head in negation. Blaster touched a match to one of the fused sticks of powder.

"Here goes for some wood," he cried, and hurled it into the shack. The building sprang apart. A black cloud of powder smoke rolled up from its center, hung for a moment in a ball and was beaten down by the rain. Wood and timbers hurtled through the air. A smashed door somersaulted into the entrance of the boiler room. The sand hogs cheered. Paddy Mullens cursed wholeheartedly.

"There's wood for you," cried Blaster. "And when that's gone, use the next shack."

The sand hogs rushed into the street intent upon gathering the precious fuel. But a shout from Blaster stopped them.

"Never mind that—I've real work for you to do," he said, and handed

two short sticks of dynamite to Paddy Mullens. "If you run short, let me know an I'll let you have some more. Now turn my recruits to work on that wood, and if they decide to run away, stick a piece of this in their hip pocket and be sure to light the fuse before they go."

"'Tis a grand idea," said Paddy. "I'll make firemen out of them yit."

Blaster motioned to the sand hogs and headed toward the shaft. The water had been rising steadily and although the excavation was fifty feet distant from the bank of the Rio Blanco Diablo, it needed but a slight rise in the surface of the river to send the water flooding across the intervening space. Carter was standing at the edge of the shaft when Blaster and his tired group of men arrived.

"I've just been down below," he said, "talking to that gang of yours. They're determined to stick it out, but I won't let them. Go over to the telephone and order them out."

"It's no use, Super," said Blaster dolefully. "Mutt never takes orders from me unless I'm standing over him with a pick handle. It will be easier to stop the river."

"Don't talk nonsense, Blaster. The river's gone crazy. It has lifted another foot within the last hour, and it doesn't show any signs of stopping."

"Let it come. We've stopped other rivers and we'll stop this one."

CHAPTER IV.

RECRUITS.

THE sand hogs waited anxiously as Blaster stood at the edge of the shaft staring at the river. The excavation was centered in the middle of Forty-second Street. It was square

and each side was fifty feet long. The black iron pipes carrying the life-giving air from the power house led over the rim of the pit and disappeared into the darkness eighty feet below. Heavy wooden timbers extended up from the depths, forming the cage frames through which small elevators brought sodden loads of river sand from the tunnel.

Ordinarily the gantry was a scene of feverish activity. A giant derrick hoisted iron plates, bags of cement, timbers and all the many things used in the construction of the tunnel, from the adjoining yard.

But today there was no movement on the gantry at all.

The half-breed workmen employed by the company to do this "top work" had left, running in fear of the river. The huge boom of the derrick hung motionless. The iron muck cars stood deserted upon their tracks. The elevators were still. All activity had ceased, but through the lash of the rain could be heard the steady whine of compressed air surging through the pipes into the tunnel. Paddy Mullens was keeping the steam up. And the compressors were turning over.

The walls of the shaft were steel—a caisson that had been sunk until the upper edge was flush with the ground level. In order to keep the Rio Blanco Diablo from flooding into this, it would be necessary to extend these walls upward on all four sides of the shaft. It was a job that would ordinarily be two days' work for fifty men. Blaster intended to finish it in two hours.

"Where's those men you were talkin' about?" growled Savage.

"I promised you more men, and you're gonna get 'em!" said Blaster. He looked at the tired group of sand

hogs. "You boys keep going. There's plenty of cement on the job. Keep stacking it around the edge of the shaft. Lay the bags four deep and plaster them with mud. Before you know it I'll have an army here."



MUTT

"Goin' to argue with 'em, Blaster?" shouted Bates.

"Sure. And I never lost an argument yet," said Blaster, and he headed down the rain-swept street. He crossed Broadway and splashed along Forty-second Street. A half mile from the gantry was a small shed used as a railroad station for the town of San Miguel. The tracks bent sharply to the west here on a winding detour through the jungle. Before the bridge had gone out the tracks led directly through town. The railroad company was patiently awaiting the completion of the tunnel in order to straighten out their main line.

At the station was another patient group. The half-breed population of San Miguel was moving on. They had quite enough of this town by the river—and quite enough of those crazy men who burrowed deep beneath that river. They would stop the next train and de-

mand to be taken on their way to a safer place.

BUT Blaster had different ideas. They were not quite definite in his mind. Ideas never were definite or orderly in Blaster's mind. They just came suddenly, mulled around a bit and were then acted upon promptly. If they happened to apply to the tunnel they were invariably good, for Blaster was a first-rate tunnel man. But upon other subjects they were apt to be disastrous.

The dynamite had worked well the first time. Why not try it again? He reached into his coat pocket and hauled out a stick. He broke off a short piece with a fuse inserted and balanced it thoughtfully in his hand. To throw that stick of dynamite past the group at the station would undoubtedly send them running toward the gantry. But there were women and youngsters in the crowd and that put an end to that idea. And so Blaster jammed the dynamite back into his pocket, grunted and headed for the mob.

"I need fifty men," he said. "I'll pay two days wages for two hours' work."

"No work—we go." The answer was prompt and unanimous. Some of the men emphasized it by turning their backs, others stared at Blaster belligerently. They had seen his method of obtaining "recruits."

The train might be along any moment. Then again it might not arrive for hours. An idea came to Blaster. It seemed so good it made his eyes blink. He would add one more holiday to the list—that of the good St. Blaster. And on this day the trains would not run—most decidedly they would not run.

He circled the group at the station

and hurried up the track a distance of a thousand yards. The half-breeds watched him, curious, distrustful. A murmur arose and there was a movement in the direction of the heading boss.

Just then Blaster sat down. He did it casually, disgustedly. Seating himself on one of the rails he rested his elbows upon his knees and his chin upon a cupped hand. He stared moodily along the twin ribbons of steel, following them with his eyes as they stretched off along a twenty-mile straightaway through the rolling lowlands. He was a picture of despair, and the crowd laughed and returned to the station.

Blaster's hand dipped into his coat pocket once again. He inserted a full stick of dynamite beneath one of the rails and thoughtfully studied the fuse. It was short—too short. But there was nothing to do about it. It meant that Blaster would have to do some tall stepping before that powder kicked off. He sighed; ruefully scratched his head, then flicked a match with his thumb nail.

He leaned forward, held the flame to the fuse and tensed his muscles preparatory to some of the fastest running he had ever done. A gust of wind carried a splatter of rain against the flame. The flame winked out.

Blaster said, "Damn!"

HE tried another match, shielding it with his hands. The fuse caught and Blaster watched for an instant, just to make sure. He was both glad and sorry when he realized the spark was on its way to the powder.

There had been a time during the World War when Blaster had stumbled upon a German machine gun nest. He had run then. There had been an-

other time during the construction of the Holland tunnel when the river broke in and flooded the heading. He had run then, too. There had been other times when Blaster had run. But never in his life had he pounded along at such a terrific gate as upon the inauguration of St. Blaster's Day.

"I wonder, does a man have to be dead to be a saint?" he thought.

As though in answer to his question a thunderous explosion sounded behind him. A giant hand smote Blaster on the back, tumbling him headlong. It rained mud and stones. Blaster's mouth was full of mud. His ears, his nose, his eyes were plastered shut with it. He scrambled erect, shook himself like a dog coming out of the water, and lurched toward the crowd at the station.

The shock of the explosion had stunned the half-breeds. And Blaster was upon them and through them before they realized he was responsible for this sudden burst of thunder. Even then they had no desire to stop him, for they considered it merely another demonstration of the craziness of these tunnel diggers. It was not until one of them pointed to a section of rail sticking up like a sore thumb from the road bed that they realized what this explosion meant to them. There would be no train from San Miguel this day. And pounding along as if his life depended upon it, which in reality it did, was the cause of this disaster.

They cursed him in Spanish, Indian, Portuguese and a mixture of all three. Then they chased him. They chased him up to the mouth of the shaft. It was only then they knew of their mistake.

"Hi, Carter," roared Blaster to the astonished superintendent, "here's

some more recruits. Better round them up before they change their minds."

"What the hell is this?" asked Carter in amazement.

"Recruits—laborers to build a dam."

The half-breeds stopped their rush but the sand hogs were amongst them, swinging shovels and pick handles. The battle was short and decisive. Those laborers who were able, decided it was better to work than fight with these wild men from the north. The river was dangerous, to be sure, but these sand hogs thought no more of breaking a man's head than of breaking open an egg for breakfast. Yes, it was safer to work. And they worked.

BAG upon bag, the cement was piled along the sides of the shaft. The miners labored like fiends, binding it, bracing it with timber, forming a solid wall to withstand the onrush of the Rio Blanco Diablo. Weaving back and forth through the pouring rain the huge blacks turned themselves into beasts of burden. It became a game—a wild race between these monstrous iron-men. Staggering under three hundred pound loads of cement, they dashed back and forth between the shaft and the yard.

The half-breeds could not keep up the pace. They tried, spurred on by the fear of these howling black savages, but it was useless. The iron gang had reverted to type. No longer were they sand hogs, working on a twentieth century construction job. The jungle had reclaimed them. The lash of the wind-driven rain, the moaning of the trees and the constant, ceaseless rush of the river water had stripped away the veneer of civilization. Once again they were back in the forests of Senegal. And they howled, leaping

along beneath their burdens, chanting wild, bawdy songs.

At the shaft, working behind the miners, were the muckers. Always ready for fight, these wild Irishmen and Scots accepted the threat of the river as a personal thing. As they passed the cement and sand to the miners they paused occasionally to scream a barbaric challenge to the rising water.

Amongst this mad crew the figure of Blaster was always predominant. He howled with the blacks, matching their bawdy songs with tunes of his own. He cursed with the muckers and worked with the miners. But always his eyes were upon the breeds. They were manpower and that was what was needed.

They were a sullen mob, going about their work with but half-hidden glances of hatred toward the towering heading boss. He knew they were awaiting an opportune moment to break and run. And he also knew when that time came, Lopez would be their leader.

Lopez was tall for a Latin, and unusually wide-shouldered. As foreman of the gang that worked in the cement yard he had attained a degree of importance amongst the half-breed population in San Miguel. He was arrogant, boastful, and proud of his leadership. His word was law with the laborers and he ruled them like a tyrant.

And now, this sand hog, who had struck him before all of his men, had pressed him into service like a common beast of burden. He was being forced to carry his share of the loads, hurried along like an animal and cursed if he slowed his pace. For a time he had been swept along with the rest in this wild fight against the river.

But as Blaster watched, he could see that Lopez had formulated some plan. He saw the breed pause beside a group of toiling laborers. He caught a half-whispered word and saw the men nod in agreement. He noticed the breeds were bunching, drawing into a group and slowing in their work.

THE dam was but half erected, and now the Rio Blanco Diablo was creeping toward the shaft. Slowly at first, then gathering speed, it swept across the lowlands. The muddy water moved steadily on towards the mouth of the tunnel. The yells of the blacks rose to a strident pitch as it curled about their ankles. The muckers spat in it. The miners cursed as it lapped at the foundations of the dam. The breeds were jibbering, looking with imploring eyes to Lopez, as though awaiting a signal.

It was then Blaster acted.

"Hi, Lopez," he roared. "Put some speed into that crew of yours—they're like a bunch of old women. Snap into it or I'll give that jaw of yours another workout!"

"My men are tired—they can work no more," said Lopez. "It is foolish. No one can stop the Rio Blanco Diablo.

"They better."

"What you mean?"

"I mean this," said Blaster. "There's twenty of my men down below and they're waiting for me. I'm going down there and you're going with me. If I drown, you drown—and your gang wouldn't like that, would they?"

"I do not go into the tunnel."

"Like hell you don't!" said Blaster.

They were at the head of the shaft, close to a group of laboring miners. The men stopped their work.

"What you goin' to do, Blaster?" cried a sweating miner, "make a sand hog of him?"

"Give him a taste of the air!" cried another.

"Careful, Blaster," said Carter. But the warning was wasted. Blaster had been stricken with another idea, and as usual was acting upon it before it got away.

There was little science in Blaster's attack. He rushed at Lopez with his chin lowered and his arms flailing. But the half-breed was expecting him this time and stepped aside. The toe of his boot lifted in an arc and thudded against the heading boss's stomach. Blaster grunted. He stopped his rush and swung around.

"A toe dancer, eh?" he growled.

He moved in on Lopez with his arms spread wide. Slowly the breed backed away. Blaster followed. His left hand shot out in a looping swing that caught Lopez flush on the temple. There was a roar of approval from the sand hogs and an angry muttering amongst the laborers as Lopez tumbled headlong into the mud. He scrambled to his feet and ducked a wild swing Blaster started from his heels.

"Stop dancing," said Blaster, "and come in and get it."

LOPEZ did not answer. He was moving warily backward, waiting for an opportunity to sink the toe of his boot in the sand hog's groin. This business of using one's hands to fight with was all right for these wild men from the north. But Lopez had been trained in a different school. Unfortunately for him, Blaster also knew all there was to know of rough and tumble fighting.

As Lopez moved away, the giant heading boss lowered his head and

charged. His feet churned the mud, his arms spun like windmills and two hundred pounds of fighting bone and muscle thundered into the half-breed. Lopez lifted a knee, then gouged at Blaster's eyes with his fingers. But the weight of the charge carried him backward into the mud and this time Blaster was on top of him.

Over and over they rolled, using knees, elbows and feet. They crashed into the base of the newly erected dam and Blaster caught the breed by the throat. He pounded his head against a cement bag. Lopez wriggled free. He dragged the heel of his boot across Blaster's face and scrambled up onto the dam.

With a bellow of rage Blaster followed him. Crawling on hands and knees he lunged at Lopez.

"Look out, Blaster," cried Carter. "He's got a knife!"

"I'll stick it up his nose," bellowed Blaster, and closed with the half-breed.

The knife whipped forward, leaving a red streak on Blaster's arm. Then one of the heading boss's huge paws closed about the wrist. There was a crunch of bone as Blaster twisted. Lopez screamed and the knife fell to the top of the embankment. A ponderous fist rose slowly, inevitably and crashed against Lopez's chin.

The breed staggered backward. Blaster yelled a warning and leaped toward him. His arms were out, his fingers clutching. But he was too late. Lopez seemed to hang for a moment upon thin air. A wild scream broke from the shaft. And his body turned end over end disappearing into the black depth.

"My God, Blaster, you've killed him!" cried Carter.

"He killed himself," said Blaster,

then turned to the gaping half-breeds. "Didn't want that to happen. But I did mean to hammer hell out of him. Any of you feel like steppin' up and squarin' things for him?"

There was no answer save a few scattered yells of approval from the sand hogs. Blaster leaped down from the embankment and lurched to Carter's side. The breeds were listening.

"Mutt's down there with twenty men," he said, pointing to the shaft. "You know he won't come out. And if you think I'm goin' to let him drown for the sake of one or a hundred half-castes, you're crazy."

"That's dangerous business, Blaster," said Carter. "I know he would have slipped that knife into you if he could, but we may not be able to make the authorities see it as an accident."

"T'hell with the authorities!" said Blaster. "We're drivin' tunnel. And I'm goin' down with Mutt. With Lopez out of the way you can keep these breeds in line. Make 'em finish that dam and send a relieving gang down soon as you can. So long!"

CHAPTER V.

WIN OR DIE!

AT the foot of the shaft the lock tender grinned at Blaster as he stepped from the elevator.

"I just had a visitor," he said. "He landed over in the corner of the sump."

"Is he dead?"

"Yeah."

"Tough luck," grunted Blaster. "Take me in."

They stepped into the man lock and the tender swung the door closed and reached for the valve handle. Blaster grasped his nose and blew violently to equalize the pressure in the passages

of his head. He watched the gauge as it rose rapidly to forty pounds. When the inner door opened he glanced at a battered alarm clock standing near the lock tender's seat.

"That clock right, Jim?" he asked.

"Sure it is. Why?"

"Nothing much—only Mutt is goin' to be mad again. I've been gone two hours and that's a long time for him to be eatin' high air."

The lock tender grinned and shook his head as the huge heading boss trotted slowly down tunnel.

Beneath the glaring lights of the heading the work of advancing the tunnel had come to a standstill. The compressors had kept the all important air hurtling down through the lines, but the volume had not been great enough.

Mutt and his miners were in the upper pockets, hammering braces into place to support the sliding wall of sand. They paused when Blaster joined them and Scotty McLean laughed as he pointed to Blaster's battered face.

"When do we get out of here?" said Scotty.

"Carter will be sending a gang down," said Blaster, "as soon as he gets that dam built a few feet higher."

"You don't mean to tell me you had sense enough to build a dam?" yelled Mutt in pretended surprise.

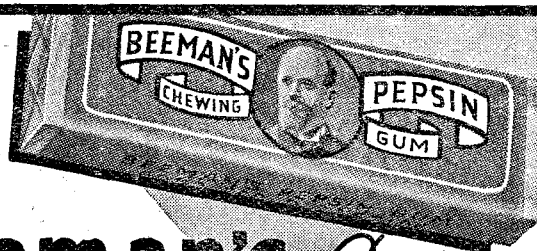
Blaster reached for a pick handle, spat on his hands and studied Mutt thoughtfully. Then he turned and climbed into the bottom.

HE was proud of this gang of his. The jokes and laughter were part of them. Each man knew the danger that threatened. Yet there was never a serious word spoken as they went about their duties. The Negroes laughed and sang as they splashed through rising water and carried timbers to brace the bulkhead built across the lower pockets. Sweat poured from their gleaming backs and the muscles stood out in ridges beneath the dark skin.

The sodden bed of the Rio Blanco had come to life. Without the restraining pressure of the air to hold back the water, the muck had changed to a soupy mass. It slithered between the planks of the hastily erected bulkhead and poured a steady stream into the tunnel. They needed air in that heading—many more pounds of it to drive back the river. And unless it came soon they were through.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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... A I D S D I G E S T I O N

Easy Gold

By DOUGLAS LEACH

These two con men were always on the lookout for easy money—but they didn't want it to boomerang from hand

WHenever me and old Doc Sewell enters Sydney Harbor we either go down below or stay on the port side of the boat, because if we're on the starboard side we can't help seeing a big house built on one of the points where all the big nabobs hang out. That house belongs

to one of the richest guys in Australia, and the sight of it is more'n me and Doc can stand, especially if, as usual, we happen to be broke at the time. Y'see, it reminds us of one of the painfulest episodes that ever happened to us.

It was up in Bundaberg, Queensland, where we'd put in to lay low for a bit. They had the reputation of being a free and easy bunch round Bundaberg, and that suited us swell, seeing we had a lotta expensive, high-powered rifles stowed away between false decks on our launch, the Zara. The harbor officials that gave us the once-over didn't ask no awkward questions, which was a great relief.

Sure, it was the gun-running expedition we'd been on, trading rifles to the blacks up in Van Arnhem's Land, but it had come unstuck. The police had

He was liable to do anything



got wise to us and we'd had to scram.

No, our consciences never troubled us over letting them heathen have firearms. They knew too much ever to use 'em against white men, and only wanted 'em for their personal and private scraps. The way me and Doc looked at it was that seeing nobody could stop 'em from fighting amongst 'emselves, they might as well have up-to-date weapons to do it with instead of making a terrible mess of each other with clubs and boomerangs. It was more humane. Anyway, quite a bit of the ammunition we used to supply was cheap salvage stuff that wouldn't explode under no circumstances whatsoever, so we probably saved a lotta lives.

Well, we hadn't been in Bundaberg very long before we struck a piece of luck. We met three hard-egg bozos in Hoolihan's saloon that made the sad mistake of inviting us into a poker game. They was tough-lookin' guys that might've been cops if their feet had been flatter, but for all their toughness they couldn't deal poker-hands like me and Doc, and after an all-night session we won four hundred pounds off 'em. Australians are kinda reckless gamblers and we might've won more, only four hundred was all they'd got. Naturally they wasn't very pleased about it, and though they didn't make no direct accusations they muttered a lot, and you could tell by the look on their hatchet faces that they suspected everything wasn't on the square. Of course they was quite right, but as Doc said, it was them that had invited us to play, and no doubt if they could've skun us they would have, and it would teach 'em to be more careful next time. When the killing was over and we departed they give us some mighty black looks, believe me.

"I can't quite figure them babies out," I tells Doc when we got outside. "They don't look like prospectors or cattlemen. Not loose-built enough. They got a sorta drilled look about 'em. And yet I don't believe they're dicks."

"We should worry," says Doc. "As long as their money's good that's all that matters."

Having made this modest stake we naturally got ambitious and wanted to make it grow, and Hoolihan's having been a lucky spot for us we went back there the next night. There'd been a few gold-strikes round Bundaberg very recent, and we expected the place to be full of innercent "new-chums" from the cities, but somehow we couldn't edge into a card game at all. So Doc started to flash his roll every time he bought a drink.

"Nothing like a wad of greenbacks as a bait for suckers," he says. "The sight of money always engenders confidence, Casaldy."

NOTHING happened for a while, but the third night we got a bite.

A big, loud-voiced, hearty guy got into conversation with us and bought us drinks. He was one of them bluff, honest fellers that look you so square in the eye and are so downright and straightforward about everything that you know they're fakes from the start.

"Wickersham is the name," he tells us, sticking out his mitt and shaking hands very sincere and friendly. "Alfred John Wickersham. Everybody knows me. Been everywhere and done everything, haven't I, Danny?" and he turns to a lean, quiet-looking, flat-faced guy standing by him.

"Too right," says Danny.

"Very pleased to meet you," says Doc, introducing me.

Although Wickersham done most of the talking, I seen Doc staring very hard at this Danny. Danny Sladen was his name, and for all he was quiet and spoke in a slow, soft Australian drawl, he looked about as safe as a tiger-snake.

Me and Doc didn't say much. We didn't have the chance. Wickersham took us into a corner and fair unbosomed his soul to us, but as he was paying for all the drinks we didn't care.

"Danny and me always travel together," he says. "He follows me around. Always has done ever since I saved his life in France, haven't you, Danny?"

"Yes," says Danny.

"I brought him in when he was wounded at Pozières," goes on Alfred. "Everybody said I should've got the Victoria Cross, but I didn't even get mentioned in despatches. I was a sniper in those days. One of the best on the Western Front, though I say it myself. Believe me, when I crawled out into No Man's Land those German beggars used to get up and hunt their holes!"

He also admitted that he was the finest scrapper in the Australian Corps and had won the heavyweight championship of the Corps three times. In fact, as far as we could make out he was a bear-cat at anything he turned his hand to. We was wondering where it was all going to lead to when he suddenly got confidential.

"I don't mind telling you blokes," he says, lowering his voice, "that I'm on a good thing out here. I've got a little money, but I need more to swing the deal."

I caught Doc's eye and I seen his lid flicker in the shadder of a wink. Now we was coming to it!

"Not twenty miles from here," con-

tinues Wickersham. "We found it just by chance. Diorite outcrop, stiff with gold! We've sunk shafts and got exceptionally good color. But it needs machinery to develop it. I've bought the mining rights and all I need is the money to go ahead." He felt in his pocket and brung out a roll of Australian five-pound notes. "See that? There's three hundred pounds there, but it's not enough. Not enough by half."

Doc reached across kinda casual and took the notes between his thumb and finger. "That's the new Commonwealth issue, eh?" he says. "I haven't seen that design before."

Alfred didn't take no notice. "I was thinking," he says. "If you've got a little money, how about coming into partnership?"

Yeah, as raw as all that!

"Ahh," says Doc, sorta dreamy. "That's quite an idea. I've always wanted to own a mine. But why pick on us? We're perfect strangers. And if the mine is good, why can't you find some of these local firms to finance you?"

Wickersham smiled. "They're too conservative," he says. "And the banks have been stung so often with worthless properties that they won't even consider a proposition as sound as this. I gave you the chance to come in with me because I took a fancy to you two as soon as I saw you. I'm funny that way. Very impulsive. But I'm honest. Anybody'll tell you that. Play the game with me, and I'll shoot square with you."

CAN you imagine that! I seen a lotta con games in my time, but can you imagine him trying to sell *us* a gold brick? *Us*, that had been trimming suckers for years?

"We can see the sort of feller you are!" I says. "Why, you—"

Doc kicked me under the table and interrupted. "It needs thinking about," he says, "but there's no harm in looking the place over, anyway."

"Certainly," beams Wickersham. "As soon as you like."

We arranged to make the trip in a coupla days' time, and after talking things over Wickersham and Danny left.

Doc watched 'em go out. "I've seen that guy Sladen somewhere before," he mutters, puzzled; "but I can't just call to mind where. Funny." Then he laughed. "Well, Casaldy, you don't often get a gold mine handed to you on a plate. We'll grab this one."

I stared at Doc. You could never tell when he was kidding. "Say, you ain't thinking there really is gold in this here hole in the ground, are you?" I wants to know.

"No, but there is in Alfred James Wickersham," comes back Doc. "He's the gold mine I was referring to, and we're going to work him for all he's worth!"

"How?" I wants to know. "What's he got?"

"Those notes were genuine," says Doc. "I know real stuff when I handle it." He rubbed his heavy old jaw and chuckled. "He thinks he's going to get three hundred pounds out of us, but we're going to take him for his whole wad! Leave it to me!"

It was a stifling hot night, and as we strolled across to the rooming house opposite Hoolihan's where we was staying, we was sure glad we'd decided not to sleep aboard the launch. What wind there was was off-shore, and the heat down in the harbor would've killed us. We wasn't scared of any of the harbor officials boarding

the launch, because the very fact of us having left it unguarded made everything look quite innercent. Even if they had they wouldn't 've found them rifles. They was too well hidden.

"How is he gonna keep up the bluff if he takes us to see this mine?" I asks.

"The usual game, I guess," grunts Doc, lowering his two hundred and twenty pounds onto the edge of his bed and mopping his bull neck. "He'll have it 'salted.' We mustn't let him know we suspect him, and yet we must make our play convincing. If we seem to be falling over ourselves with eagerness to invest he may get onto us."

We made the trip in a battered old flivver—me and Doc and Alfred. For some reason or other Danny Sladen didn't come. After joltin' over miles of rough road through scrub and rocks, with the Queensland sun boring holes in us, we left the flivver and tramped a coupla miles off the trail to where there was a few prospect holes and one larger shaft. I didn't know nothing about mining. So I left Doc to look things over and do the talking. He seemed to be poking about and arguing with Wickersham for hours, and I wasn't sorry when we started back.

ALFRED, who drove, was talking all the time, telling us, as usual, how good he was. He was the biggest blow-hard I ever met, and it didn't seem natural that he should expect us to believe him. And it was then I begun to feel uneasy. Yeah, I begun to have a hunch that he was a lot smarter than he sounded, and I felt in my bones that me and Doc was gonna get fooled. I didn't see how, and I tried to kid myself it was impossible and that I was worrying over

nothing, but I was scared. I told Doc so as soon as we was alone after we'd got back.

Doc only laughed. "Don't you worry," he says. "Mind you, I'm not saying he's not clever. The way he had that mine salted was a masterpiece. Not too obvious, but enough color to make it look something out of the ordinary. But I've got his number. We'll get him all right."

It was later on, that very evening, that we got the first shock. We was in our room, laying on our bed with our shoes off, taking it easy. It was getting dark, but we hadn't troubled to light the lamp. Suddenly the door opened and in walked that quiet bozo, Danny Sladen. He didn't knock or nothing.

"Hello!" says Doc, staring.

Sladen shut the door behind him and leant against it.

"Take a seat," says Doc.

"I'll stand," says Sladen. There was something in his voice that sounded funny.

"What's troubling you?" asks Doc, sitting up on the edge of his bed.

"I suppose you've been thinkin' over that mine proposition?" inquires Sladen.

"Sure," grunts Doc. "We've been giving it a lot of earnest consideration."

"Well, I've come to help you make up your mind," says Sladen. "Alfred is a mate of mine. I think a lot of him. And I'm going to get you to invest in his mine. Y'see cully, he's set on it, and I'm not going to see him disappointed. Oh, you'll do it all right!" and he pulled his hand outa his pocket and there was a gun in it.

Me and Doc stiffened. Y'know, mister, there's two kinds of men what pull guns. Some do it as a bluff, and you

know they won't really shoot. This soft-voiced Australian bozo was the other kind. You could tell by the very set of him that he was liable to do anything.

"You can't get away with anything as raw as this!" rasps Doc. "What do you take us for?"

"A pair of crooks who've got too much sense to get six years hard!" comes back Sladen.

"Just what do you mean?" says Doc.

"I mean they sock it to you good and hard for trading rifles to the blacks in this country!" says Sladen. "If you don't do as I say—well, I know enough to get you a nice long spell in the pen, my oath! I was doin' a little exploring on your boat while you were away with Alfred."

"You dirty rat!" snarls Doc.

Me, I felt kinda empty at my stomach. I'd been expecting 'em to pull something slick, but nothing as barefaced as this. "Why, it's blackmail!" I snorts.

"Call it what you like, cully," grins Sladen. "I knew your fat pal here as soon as I saw him. Remember doin' a turn in Woodlark about five years ago?" he asks Doc. "I was serving a short sentence there myself for beating up the Resident Magistrate at Sual, though I left soon after you came. There was quite a lot of talk about you in Woodlark. You'd been running liquor to the blacks round Cape Vogel for a long time, but they'd had a hard job to get proof, and it was only by accident they discovered you'd been planting the stuff under the floor of your cabin. When you started talking about your launch the other day I guessed you were up to the same sort of game, so as soon as you were out of the way I looked for myself. Same

place. Ripped up one of the boards, and found rifles! More serious than liquor, my oath!"

"SO you think we're just going to hand over our roll without any more fuss, huh?" says Doc, with an edge to his voice that meant large gobs of grief for somebody.

"Oh, no, this isn't a hold-up," comes back Sladen, cool as you please. "I'm only holding this gun on you so's to make sure you'll listen to me. This is going to be done all legal and above-board. We'll have the papers all ready and you'll sign in the presence of witnesses tomorrow. And don't forget to bring the cash. I'll let you off light with three hundred and fifty quid, and you'll get a third interest in the mine. Dirt cheap, I call it!" He laughed kinda mean. "And another thing—don't get the idea you can slip aboard and clear out tonight. I'll be keeping my eye on you, and if you as much as go near that launch of yours I'll blow the gaff to the harbor police! You won't get very far if those blokes take after you. They've got a power launch that 'ud make rings round your old scow, and they haven't made a pinch in months. They'd be awful pleased!" He reached behind him for the door handle. "See you tomorrow."

Sladen dropped his gun-hand and half turned, and in a flash Doc was off the edge of his bed and on him in a flying tackle that pinned his arms to his side and brung him to his knees. Sladen didn't fire. Even if he'd been willing to take the chance he was just as likely to have plugged his own feet as to hit Doc, from the position he was in.

"Nail him, Casaldy!" gasps Doc.

I didn't like hitting a guy what wasn't in a position to hit back, but what th' hell! Our only chance was to

lay him out so he'd stay unconscious long enough for us to get away to a good start. If we could get outa sight before they took after us they wouldn't be able to tell which way we'd gone. He was beginning to shout blue murder, so I took a quick crack at him beneath the ear. He was squirming so much it didn't catch him square, and though it jarred him it didn't knock him out. He dropped his gun and pulled Doc down on top of him. I grabbed the gun and looked for a likely spot to hit him again, but Doc was in the way, and before I could do anything a helluva hubbub broke out down below and feet come pounding up the stairs. Seeing we'd been making enough row to rouse the whole town, this wasn't surprising. I managed to lock the door, and at the same time Doc banged Sladen up against the wall hard enough to 've killed some guys. As it turned out, though, it only stunned that bozo temporary. Them Australians are sure tough!

Our room was at the back of the house and had a verandah. We heard the proprietor hammering at the door and a lotta shouting going on, so we only waited long enough to jam our shoes on and grab our coats before we beat it. Doc was halfway over the verandah rail before he found he'd left his wallet with all our dough under the pillow, so I snatched it up, stuffed it well down into my hip pocket and dropped to the ground after him. Then we clambered over the wooden fence into a vacant lot and dodged down a side alley towards the harbor.

THOUGH night had come the moon was up, and that made things harder for us. We didn't wait for no formalities or to see if

there was any harbor dues to pay once we reached the wharf, believe me! We jumped into the dinghy, rowed out to the launch, and started the engine up. By the time we got it going we could hear someone shouting at us to stop, and there seemed to be quite a stir back on the wharf.

I took the wheel and headed out for the open sea on high.

Before we was clear of the stone breakwater Doc started to cuss. "They're after us!" he cries.

I looked back and seen the black shape of a long, raking power-launch cutting across the harbor. I gave the engine everything she'd got, but it wasn't no use. This other craft was overhauling us fast. There was a heavy swell running outside the breakwater and the launch begun to pitch. Doc sunk his fingers into my arm.

"Stall 'em off as long as you can, Casaldy!" he hollers in my ear, and dives down below. He said something else as he disappeared but I didn't catch it.

If it had been a dark night I might've give them babies quite a chase, but there wasn't a hope in the world. The power-launch churned up alongside, and though I dodged and yawed and nearly rammed 'em twice, I finally had to heave-to. There was four of these guys, in blue uniform and peaked caps. Harbor police all right. That meant that Sladen had got to 'em and spilt the beans, and I cussed myself, and Doc too, for not slugging that Australian devil good and proper when we had the chance. It was plumb carelessness, and it looked like it was gonna cost us plenty.

Three of 'em clumb aboard, and when I got a good look at 'em in the moonlight I pretty near passed out. We was up against it *right*, for these

bozos was the same three we'd skinned in the poker game a few nights before! They'd been in plain-clothes then, and though I'd been suspicious of 'em all along, it had never occurred to me that they might be harbor cops. What a break!

"What do you want?" I says, getting between 'em and the cabin stairs.

"Just a look round, digger," says one of 'em. "We've got information that you're carrying rifles between decks."

"Then whoever told you, gave you a bum steer, feller," I says, trying to bluff. "We ain't carrying nothin' but stores."

"Then what are you in such a hurry for?" he comes back, cold and hard. "Out of my way!"

I licked my lips. What chance would we have explaining about all them rifles to a hard-boiled judge? Especially with the record me and Doc had! I seen a little picture of us both doing a tough stretch in the St. Helena penitentiary down Brisbane way, and I got desperate. I reached down into my jeans and dug out our roll. After all, money talks, and me and Doc had found that most cops was very human—in some ways, anyhow. I peeled off ten five-pound notes.

"Listen, boys," I says, "can't we figure something out?"

The guy that had done all the talking looked at me, then at the fifty pounds, and turned to one of his pals. "How much did these two beach-rats crook us out of the other night, Joe?"

Joe spat over the rail. "All told, within four hundred quid."

"That's right," agrees the remaining bozo.

"*Four hundred quid*," repeats the first guy, saying it over very slow and with plenty meaning.

I SIGHED, and though it was like parting with my eyesight I handed over the whole wad. "There's three-sixty," I says. "It's all we've got."

"Oh well, I suppose that'll have to do," he says, counting it. "After all, it's not the money that matters, it's the spirit in which it's given. Come on, Joe!" He stuffed the dough in his pocket and pushed past me toward the cabin.

"Hey, what's this!" I yelps, grabbing his arm. "You're not going in there now I've paid you, you double-crossing scuts!"

"Paid us?" he says, turning on me kinda indignant. "Listen, cully, you and your mate *stole* that money from us the other night. We've heard all about you two. You're crooked as sin. You're only giving us back what's due to us, and at that we're still a few quid short!" He shook his head, and clicked his tongue against his teeth. "We should never dream of taking bribes!" he says.

"I don't believe he really meant to bribe us, Charlie," says Joe. "Of course, if he did it makes things all the more serious, and we should have to report it."

Well, what could I do, mister? The devils had me cold. But just then the cabin door opened and Doc come up on deck.

"What's going on?" he says, acting innercent, and when they told him he stood on one side. "All right, search and be damned!" he tells 'em.

When they'd gone down he took me aside. He was sweating like a bull. "Well, I've done it," he says. "I dumped every last one quietly through the porthole, and I managed to get the boards back into place too. We paid good money for them and I hate to

think of them lying at the bottom of the sea, but hell, it was the only way!"

"Gosh Almighty," I croaks, "and I paid away our entire and total wad for nothing!"

"*What!*" bellers Doc. "Why, you poor, nit-witted, pin-headed son of a flop-eared mule, what the Sam Hill did you do that for?"

I explained, but Doc was past listening to reason. He was fair foaming at the mouth, and it was as much as I could do to stop him from goin' down and tangling with them three birds right then. As for them, they ripped the cabin to pieces and come up looking some disappointed. Leastways, as disappointed as three guys that had got back a unexpected bunch of dough could look.

"You're a foxy pair," grunts Charlie, "but don't think you're goin' to get off Scot free! You'll bring that hooker back, and tomorrow you'll be summoned for breaking harbor regulations and trying to evade inspection."

"Suits me," snaps Doc. "I've got business back in town, anyway." He meant it too. His tough old mug was set like a rock and he kept clenching his big fists.

"It's going to be just too bad for Sladen and Wickersham!" he husks. "I'm going to hammer them to a pulp if it's the last thing I ever do, Casaldy! Especially Wickersham. He kept in the background when it came to putting the screws on, but he was at the bottom of it all. It was his scheme."

It wasn't so very late when we got back, and right away Doc started to hunt them two down. We found Wickersham in Hoolihan's, talking in that booming voice of his to Lassiter, a guy that worked for Garstang's, the big mining engineers. Sladen wasn't with him. The scrap with me and Doc, and

his chasing us afterwards, must've took it out of him, and he was probably in his room.

DOC was loaded for bear, and he didn't waste no time. He walked straight up to Wickersham. "Wickersham," he says, "you're a big, loud-mouthed, lying, swindling, blackmailing skunk!"

Wickersham was took aback. "You're mad!" he blusters. "Swindling? Blackmailing? What's it all about? What do you mean?"

"I mean that when you found you couldn't fool us, you got your precious partner to try and blackmail us!" snarls Doc, stepping forward with his hard old jaw stuck out a foot.

"Better be careful!" warns Alfred, backing away. "You're no match for me when it comes to fighting. Don't do anything you'll be sorry for, Sewell!"

The talking in the saloon died down all of a sudden, like it does when a fight starts. Everybody was looking at Doc and Alfred.

Me, I felt like laughing, for Doc was a tearing, smashing, rough-house scrapper with a sleeping-powder in one fist and homicide in the other. He was muscled like a wild-cat beneath his fat, and he was a murderous old devil when his blood was up.

Well, he didn't say nothing more. He just jumped in and took a swing at Alfred that 'ud've killed him if it had connected, but Alfred ducked. Doc swung again and missed again. Then Wickersham's fist shot out so quick you couldn't see it, and Doc sat on the floor.

It didn't seem hardly possible. There was only one guy in the room that was more surprised than me, and that was Doc. He blinked once or twice, swore, climbed to his feet and piled in again.

And in about ten seconds Alfred James Wickersham showed beyond the shadow of a doubt that he'd forgot more about fighting than Doc had ever knew! The best fighter in the Australian Corps, huh? I bet he was the best fighter in the whole cockeyed war, and it was lucky for Dempsey and Tunney and the rest of 'em that he never turned pro!

He just made a monkey outa Doc, darting in and out and plastering him all over the lot. He cut him to ribbons! He finally rung down the curtain with a short-arm jolt to the point that didn't travel six inches, but it toppled Doc over on his back, out to the wide, wide world.

Lassiter helped me carry him off to the side of the saloon and prop him on a chair.

"Is Wickersham a pal of yours?" I asks Lassiter. "Gosh Almighty, he's a holy terror! No fooling, I thought he was all hot air!"

Lassiter grinned. "That's just his way," he says. "He's not exactly modest, and most of his bragging has got the goods behind it. A good natured bloke, too. Wouldn't do anybody any harm. What did your mate here pick on him for?"

BECAUSE it was his unlucky day, I guess," I says, looking down to where Doc was just beginning to show faint signs of life. He was a mess! He never had been exactly handsome, but right now that face of his looked like it had been run over by a truckload of hob-nailed shoes. And as what Lassiter had said gradually sunk in, I begun to see that we'd made what you might call a very serious error of judgment. "You'll be telling me next that that darned mine of Alfred's is genuine too," I says.

"Well, if isn't, I'll get fired!" comes back Lassiter. "I'm getting our firm to lend him money on it. I haven't seen it, but what Alfred says is good enough for me. He only told me about it tonight, or I'd 've fixed it for him before."

It was all true, mister. Wickersham hadn't known nothing about Sladen trying to blackmail us. That had been Sladen's own idea, and he'd kept it to himself because he knew Alfred wouldn't stand for no rough stuff.

I got Doc up to bed at last, and patched him up as well as I could. It was some time before he was in a fit state to understand the truth about Alfred and the mine, and when he did savvy it he was almost overcome. As

I pointed out, we'd gone to all kinds of trouble, we'd lost our dough to the harbor cops, we'd lost our rifles, we was getting summoned next day, and Doc had took the trimming of his life—all to stop ourselves from getting onto something good!

"Well, I hope the damned mine peters out!" husks Doc, with plenty feeling.

But it didn't. It turned out to be one of the richest mines in Queensland. Wickersham Deeps they called it, and the amount of gold they took outa that miserable hole in the ground was disgusting.

Now you know why me and Doc can't stand the sight of Alfred's house on Sydney Harbor.

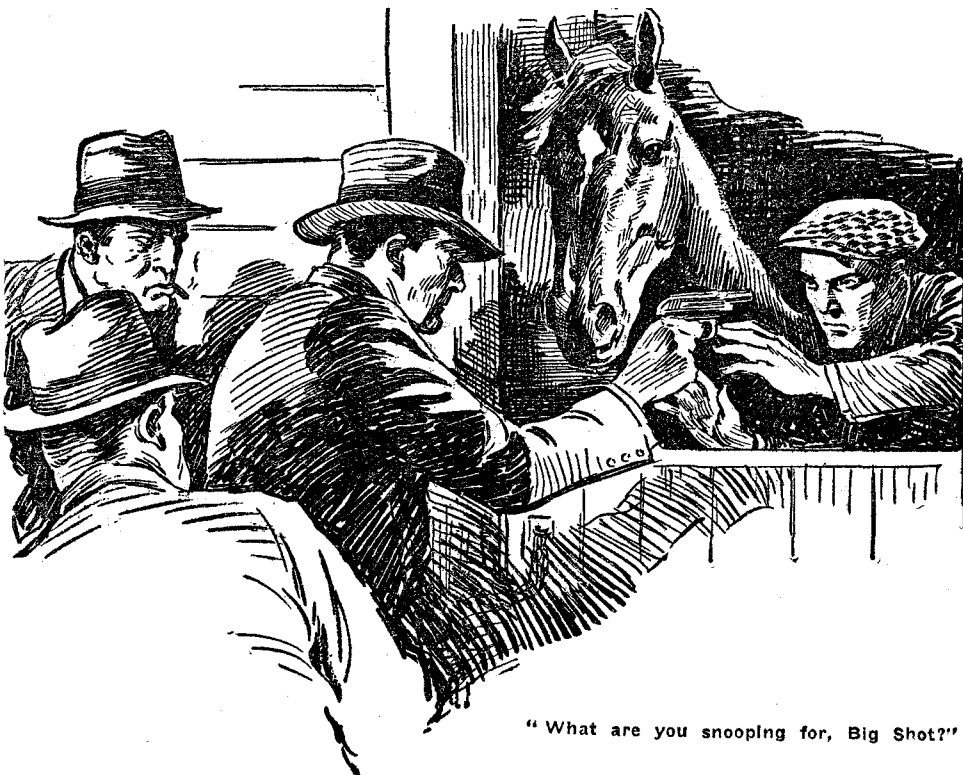
THE END

Animal Bums

ONCE the U. S. Government made the experiment of crossing Colorado's burro with zebras. The result was a docile-looking animal called a hyney. Work of any sort didn't agree with hyneys. Five were sold to a circus, which taught them a few simple tricks. At the first performance all five dashed out of the tent and roamed the town, breaking up things.

—J. W. Holden.





"What are you snooping for, Big Shot?"

Blackout

Novelette

By JUDSON P. PHILIPS

Author of "Flashing Blades,"
"Pigskin Pirate," etc.

*"If it's the last thing I do,
I'll get you guys!"—but the
end to these crooks came
sooner than "Speed" figured*

CHAPTER I.

FIVE HUNDRED BY FIVE O'CLOCK.

BEIN' broke in Saratoga is like starvin' to death in the middle of the Washington Market. The town is lousy with money; hundreds of

thousands of dollars' worth of horse-flesh, expensive cars, and jewelry decked out on them society dames like they was a Christmas tree. There's bank accounts there durin' the season that if you added 'em together would pay off the war debt. But a trainer out of a job is somethin' else.

I been trainin' horses for twenty-five years and every one of those years I come to Saratoga, and until this year I always had a job. But this year I ain't workin', on account of old man Summers, who's been hirin' me for fifteen years, has kicked the bucket just before we was ready to ship our string to the track. Well, the best way to get a job is nosin' around where the horses are, so I come to Saratoga anyway.

And I ain't exactly broke, because I've got fifty-eight bucks in my pocket. But I'm worse than broke, on account of I promised to give a guy five

hundred iron men before six o'clock; and I got just about as much chance of puttin' my fingers on it as a cow has of gettin' a college degree in astronomy. So I go into the Grand Union and order myself a double whisky straight; only it don't do me no more good than if it had been pea soup. That's how keyed up I am.

Of course I was a sucker to promise Mark Gentry I'd have the dough on the line for him, but if you'd seen his face the way I did after the doctor left—white and drawn and pinched it was. And if you'd seen that awful look in his eyes, I guess you'd of done the same.

I was sittin' in a wicker chair on the little flagstone terrace of Mark's cottage that mornin' watchin' him and the doctor standin' down at the end of the path near the gate. Mark is talkin' earnest like, but I can't hear what he says.

The doctor is lookin' down, kickin' up some of the gravel off the path with the toe of his shoe. Then, after a minute or two the doc shrugs his shoulders kind of helpless like and goes out the gate and off up the street.

Mark stands there, lookin' after him, and I see him kind of pass his hand over his eyes like he's in a daze. Then he turns kind of slow and starts back up the path. I take the makin's out of my pocket and start rollin' myself a butt, only it don't come out so good, on account of my hands ain't as steady as they'd ought to be. Mark sits down in a chair opposite me and covers his face with his hands. Neither of us don't say nothin' for a while, and finally I can't stand it no longer.

"Foundered pretty bad, eh, kid?" I asks. I didn't need to ask, only I had to say somethin'.

Mark looks up and he laughs, only it ain't a pleasant kind of a sound.

"Speed," he says, "if I were to use a situation like this in one of my stories they'd laugh at me. Sob stuff, they'd call it. The mortgage on the old homestead... God!"

"How bad is it?" I ask him, right out.

He takes a cigarette out of his pocket, lights it, and drags on it two or three times before he says anything. "Some very peculiar form of spinal meningitis," he said. "An operation must be performed almost at once if... if Mary is to live. And there's just one doctor who can perform this operation, and he's in California... three thousand miles away!"

"Do you understand that, Speed? California! And it'll take five hundred dollars to get her out there and into a hospital. Five hundred dollars! And I've got just exactly nine dollars and thirty-eight cents in my jeans!"

"How soon would she have to go?" I ask.

"Today... tonight!" he almost shouts. "Every hour we waste may mean that we get there too late."

I feel a dry sensation in my mouth.

"There'd ought to be some one you could borrow it off," I says.

MARK laughs again, and I don't like the sound of it. "Whom can I borrow it from?" he says. "Have you got it, Speed? Nobody I know has five hundred dollars. Maybe I could raise it in a week—in a couple of months. To... to pay for a funeral!"

And he suddenly drops his head forward on the little wicker table and begins to bawl. God, it gives me the wil-lies to see a man cry... especially a regular guy like Mark Gentry.

Well, I know he's up against it all right. If he hadn't of been I wouldn't of been settin' there on the terrace with him. This Mark Gentry was some sort of a newspaper man once . . . doin' book reviews—that kind of high hat stuff. Mary is his wife, and a sweller girl you never want to meet in your whole life. She's a thoroughbred, with all the proper markin's. Well, Mark loses his job, and just about that time an uncle up and dies and leaves him this little cottage in Saratoga. This uncle had played the ponies, I guess, and he didn't have nothin' but this house left when he checks out. Mark and Mary move in, and Mark starts writin' for a livin' . . . free-lancin' they call it. Things don't go so good, I guess, and what little money they've got is givin' out fast.

That's where I blow in. I'm havin' a beer in the old Grand Union and tellin' the bartender, an old pal of mine, I'm lookin' for a nice quiet place to live for the next few weeks. Out of the blue a nice lookin' young feller standin' at the bar speaks up.

"My wife and I have a room we'd like to let," he says. "If . . . if you'd care to look at it." He acts like he's been caught stealin' apples, and right away I figure takin' roomers isn't his regular business.

"My name's Speed Hallor," I says, "and if I suit you and your missus I got a hunch you'll suit me."

And that's how I come to be sittin' there on the terrace with Mark. Him and Mary had been slick to me. And then all of a sudden Mary was took sick. At first we didn't think nothin' much of it, and then she kept gettin' worse and worse and finally the doc comes and sees her a couple of times. And now this. She'd got to get to California . . . or else.

"Does Mary know you can't raise the money?" I ask him; and he just shakes his head.

"No," he says, his teeth set tight together. "That's the hell of it, Speed." He's close to hysterical. "I can't stand it, I tell you. I can't!"

And right there I couldn't stand it no more, and I stuck my neck out.

"Hey, hold your horses," I says. "You don't have to stand it, kid. I don't know why I let you go on this way, when all the time I had an out for you."

Gosh, he looks up at me quick, and the sudden look of hope in his eyes was more than I could take. So I go on talkin', not hardly knowin' what I'm sayin', on account of it's all apple-sauce.

"There's a feller here at the track owes me a cool grand," I says. "I staked him a while back when I was flush. He called me up last night and said if I'd come around to the track this afternoon he'd pay me off. Five hundred of it is yours . . . and that's that!"

"Speed!"—his lips is twisted in a funny way—"I couldn't let you do that. I . . ."

He looks like a drownin' man grabbin' at a straw.

"NUTS!" I says. "You scram in there, tell Mary the news, and fix up your reservations for the West. I'll be back here with the dough before six o'clock. Now . . . now you got no time to waste, with all your packin' and everythin'."

He jumps up and grabs holt of my hand, and I thought he was goin' to bust all the bones in it.

"Speed," he says. And then he kind of chokes. "Speed, I'll do anything . . ."

"Amnsray," I says, kind of hoarse.

He starts runnin' into the house, and I stand there feelin' a little dizzy. I've got just fifty-eight bucks, and there ain't nobody in the world owes me a cent, and how the hell I'm goin' to raise five hundred bucks by five o'clock is a mystery Sherlock Holmes couldn't solve!

That's why I go to the Grand Union for a drink.

CHAPTER II.

BLACKOUT.

"TOM," I says to the bartender, "if you had to raise five hundred berries for a friend before six o'clock tonight, how would you go about it?" I says.

Tom is polishin' glasses and he don't look up from the job.

"Carry any life insurance?" he asks.

"No," I says.

"Because the only way I can think of," he says, "is make over your policy to your friend and then go jump off a cliff."

"I'm not kiddin'," I says, kind of sore.

I guess he can tell from my face I ain't, because he says, serious, "If a ten spot will do you any good, Speed..."

"Thanks, Tom. If I raise four ninety I'll be back for the ten," I says.

Well, that's the way it is. I figure there's maybe twenty guys in Saratoga who would come across with a five or a ten if I needed it, but if they all come through it wouldn't be half enough. Hell, I think, there just ain't any way to raise it!

And then I think of Mary Gentry lyin' helpless in her bed, and

Mark countin' on me to produce, and I darn near go nuts.

I start wanderin' out toward the track on account of I seem to think better when I can get a whiff of the stables, and anyhow the racin' will be startin' in a bout half an hour, and every one will be out there.

But the nearer I get to the track the less chance I can see of raisin' the money any other way. It's screwy, even thinkin' about it. But then the whole situation is screwy. It's screwy that little Mary Gentry should be in such a jam. She ain't never done anythin' to rate it.

That's how I finally drop into Pete Gallivan's place. There's a lot of flossy places in Saratoga where you can lay a bet outside the track, but there ain't a squarer one than Pete Gallivan's. I've knowed Pete for years, and many's the time he's give me a right steer. But I ain't lookin' for advice today. When I'm layin' a bet serious I don't play hunches. I know most of the horses all over the circuit...know just how they run their last race...know just what kind of shape most of 'em is in. So when I'm playin' my dough serious, I play it on a horse I know about.

Well, I sit down in Pete's back room and order up a cup of java. Pete runs a little restaurant in connection with his place, and in the back room there's a big slate up on the wall with the names of all the horses and their odds written down on it. So I sit there lookin' 'em over and gettin' lower by the minute.

Oh, there's plenty ten-to-one shots or better, but there ain't one of 'em I'd bet a plugged nickel on to win...let alone fifty-eight bucks. And then all of a sudden I see one, and I feel little prickles of excitement on the back of my neck.

It's in the second race. Jeremiah at ten-to-one. A race for two-year-olds at five furlongs. And I know somethin' about this Jeremiah. In the first place, he belongs to old man Hornbostle, one of the small-time owners, but a dyed-in-the-wool horseman. He does his own trainin' and he knows the racin' game inside out. He's got a string of eight or ten horses, and they all have those religious names like Jeremiah, and Obadiah, and Ezekiel, and a lot of others I never heard of.

NOW this Jeremiah ain't run a single race before, on account of just when old man Hornbostle had him ready to go down to Hialeah he gets kicked by another horse, so the old boy has to scratch him in the races he's entered in. But only a couple of weeks ago I come up on the train from New York with old man Hornbostle.

"Speed," he said, "this Jeremiah horse of mine is the fastest two-year-old on four legs you ever see," he says. "First time you see his name up in a race, put your shirt on him. The odds will be good, on account of the bookies don't know nothin' about him. You can run two bucks into a month's rent by puttin' it on his nose!"

And there's Jeremiah at ten-to-one, and I've got fifty-eight bucks that'll grow into five hundred and eighty if old man Hornbostle is right. And I *know* there's nothin' else at the odds I've gotta have on the board that has a chance.

So what the hell! I toss off my java and walk over to where Pete is takin' in bets. He looks up at me, grinnin'.

"Two bucks on what, Speed?" he asks.

I reach in my pocket for my dough, and I try to make my voice sound casual, but it's shakin' like crazy. "I'm

splurgin' a little today, Pete," I says. "I've got fifty-eight bucks I want to play on Jeremiah in the second . . . to win."

Pete's mouth drops open and he looks at me for a minute without sayin' nothin'. Then his teeth click together.

"Know what you're doin' Speed?" he asks.

"Like I said...on the nose!" I says.

"I hate to see you go haywire," Pete says. "You ain't kiddin' me, Speed. You're doin' this for a reason."

I try to grin natural like. "The reason is I want to hook you for five hundred and eighty bucks," I says. And I hold out the money.

But Pete don't take it right away. "You and me have been pals for years," he said, in a kind of a low voice. "There's somethin' cock-eyed about that second race, Speed. There's a wad of jack bein' bet on it away from the track...and it ain't on Jeremiah. Real dough, Speed."

I feel my heart kind of tightenin' up. "Who is gettin' the play?" I asks.

"Blackout," he says.

Oh, boy, a load goes off my back right then and there. This Blackout is a dog, and I ought to know, on account of up till a month ago I was trainin' him. Old man Summers, my late boss, raised him, and he ain't worth what it would cost to make hamburger out of him.

"You're crazy," I tell Pete. "He and I is old pals, and the odds ought to be one-hundred-to-one on him. He can't run a lick, Pete."

"Yeah," said Pete, kind of dry, "that's why nearly two hundred grand has been bet on him at odds that started at fifty-to-one and is down now to

three-to-two. You used to train this Blackout, didn't you, Speed? Know who owns him now?" I shake my head. "Larry Beal. And he's put his shirt on this race," says Pete.

"Then he's a bigger fool than I ever thought," I says, "because Blackout couldn't win a race if the King of Siberia owned him. And that's right from the horse's mouth, Pete."

Pete shrugs. "I just thought I'd tell you, Speed. The wise boys are goin' for him heavy . . . so heavy they've hammered down his price to almost nothin'. But you ought to know," he says "Still want to lay your dough on Jeremiah?"

"To win," I says, and I hand it over and get my ticket.

I FELT pretty good for about five minutes after that, and then I begin to get jittery as I'm walkin' out toward the track. I knew Pete hadn't been stringin' me. Two hundred thousand smackers bet on Blackout! I know he can't win, no matter how much is bet on him. I know there's at least four other horses in the race, not countin' Jeremiah, who'll make him look like he's pullin' an ice wagon. But two hundred grand! When the boys start throwin' money like that around, especially away from the track, you can count on findin' bread crumbs in your bed!

But Blackout! Even with monkey glands he can't win!

Then I get to thinkin' about Larry Beal, who owns him. If it wasn't for the libel laws I'd say he was a crook. He's a plugin' gambler, and anythin' he's mixed up in don't smell like cologne.

"Speed," I says to myself, "maybe you'd ought to kind of wander out to the stables and have a look around."

The boy on the gate knows me and has been slippin' me in every day. I wander on through the paddock to the stables and almost the first guy I see is old man Hornbostle.

I grab hold of him. "Say," I says, "I followed your tip and put my shirt on your nag."

He looks at me, and his right eye closes in a long wink.

"Nice goin', Speed," he says. "You can reserve your suite at the Miami-Biltmore for the winter right now. Want to have a look at him?"

"Plenty," I says.

Well, about thirty seconds of lookin' at Jeremiah and I feel about ten years younger. He's a swell-lookin', long-legged bay, and I don't need Hornbostle to tell me he's in the pink. And he's calm as a clam . . . not frettin' or nervous. But I thought I'd ask the old man a little more.

"There's funny talk goin' around about heavy sugar on Blackout," I says. "I know he can't run, but Larry Beal and his pals is goin' for him, hook, line and sinker. I figgered there must be a trick in somewhere."

The old man gave me a hard look.

"You know there's never any trick about the way my horses run, Speed. But it's funny they'd be playin' Blackout . . ." And he rubs his chin thoughtful.

"How about your jockey?" I asks him. "Can you count on him?"

The old man breaks out into a broad grin and he's strokin' Jeremiah's neck. "My own kid is ridin' him," he says. And little Johnny Hornbostle is a hell of a smart rider. "I guess the answer is, somebody's been stringin' Beal along," says the old man. "He don't know too much about horses and somebody may be playin' him for a sucker. I wouldn't worry about my money,

Speed. I've laid five grand on Jeremiah... just about all I've got. That's how sure I am."

WELL, that had ought to of been enough for me, but somehow I figgered I'd wander over to Beal's stable and have a look at my old pal Blackout. I kept tellin' myself that everythin' was okay, because it *had* to be okay on account of Mary and all. Jeremiah was everythin' I'd expected him to be, and old man Hornbostle had been savin' him for just such a spot as this.

It looked in the bag...all except for this crazy bettin' on Blackout.

Beal had a big stable of horses at Saratoga that season...some pretty good ones, too. There was three or four high-class stake horses. One of 'em named Hairbrush ran the legs off Equipoise at Havre de Gras the year before and might of won if he'd had a smarter ride.

Then he had a bunch of platers, and one or two promisin' three-year-olds...and Blackout.

When I get to the stables, I see a bunch of fellows up to the other end of the long row of box stalls, and I'm wonderin' if I ought to go up and chew the rag, when right opposite me I see a box stall with Blackout's name written over the top of the door. The colt's head is stickin' out over the top of the half-door. And right outside I see a guy sittin' on a box, chewin' on a straw. I ain't never see this guy before around the track. He looks dressed up in a sort of Broadway suit and white sport shoes. And his eyes is set too close together.

As I walk up to Blackout he speaks kind of sharp.

"Scram along and peddle your papers," he says.

I grin at him friendly and reach out my hand kind of careful to pat the colt. Blackout's a mean actor in his stall, and I'm ready to pull my hand away quick if he takes a nip at me. But he don't. Lets me rub his nose quiet as can be.

"We're old pals," I says to the guy with the straw in his mouth. "I'm Speed Hallor. Trained this colt for a year."

"Yeah?"

He looks at me out of them slit eyes.

"Looks like you done somethin' to his disposition," I says. "He used to be as cranky as anythin' in his stall."

The straw has stopped bobbin' up and down in this feller's mouth, and his eyes has a funny glitter in 'em. Made me feel sort of uneasy, though I couldn't figure out quite why. Blackout is nuzzlin' around my coat pocket and I kind of rub him back of his ears. And then all of a sudden I begin to feel a strange cold sensation all over like somebody had poured ice water in my blood.

Blackout always raised hell if you touched his ears, but he's goin' for this treatment now like he loved it.

The guy gets up all of a sudden from the box.

"Say," he says, "I'm not supposed to leave this horse because he's runnin' this afternoon. But as long as you know him, would you mind watchin' him a minute while I speak to a pal?"

I could feel myself tremblin' all over.

"Sure," I says. "I'd be glad to."

He gives me a funny look and walks away quick toward the guys up at the other end. And all the while I'm gettin' colder and colder. Then I take a quick look down the line, see nobody is watchin' me, and I open the door and

slip into the stall with Blackout. Usually he would lay back his ears and try to crowd you, but he stands still now, just turnin' his head around with his ears pricked up, lookin' at me.

"Easy, boy," I says, and I run my hand down his hindquarters to a place just over his off hock. And then I stand back and look at him, and my legs is shakin' under me like I had malaria. *Because this horse ain't Blackout!* Blackout has a mean disposition, but this feller is meek as a lamb; Blackout has a little bunch over his off hock, but this one ain't. But they look exactly alike...except to me! I suppose a Chinese mother could tell her own kid, though they all look alike to somebody else. Well, I trained Blackout for a year, and this ain't him.

THEN I go up and open this horse's mouth. He's five years old if he's a day! And I see the whole thing. Beal is runnin' a ringer... a five-year-old in a five furlong race for two-year-olds. If this horse is any good he'll run those younger ones into the ground! A good five-year-old can beat a good two-year-old any day! You can't lose! And I guess nobody in the world but me could of spotted the difference in this horse and Blackout.

I'm shakin' like a leaf when I start to look him over careful to see if they've painted him up any. They do that to cover up any white spots or anythin' that might be different in the two horses, but you can't tell much from just lookin'. They take weeks to do a paint job on a horse, and it won't rub off when he sweats or anythin' like some folks think. But I don't need to find any paint to know for myself that this horse is a ringer.

No wonder Beal and his gang has laid a fortune on this race! And then

I realize that unless I dump the apple cart for 'em, and do it quick, I'm goin' to lose my fifty-eight bucks and little Mary Gentry is never goin' to move from that Saratoga cottage.

I turn quick for the door of the stall...and then I stop, and I guess my heart must of stopped too. I'd been so busy, I hadn't heard anybody, but there's three guys standin' outside the stall lookin' at me. One of 'em gives me a kind of nasty smile.

"What are you snoopin' for, Big Shot?" he asks, soft like.

And I see the sun glitterin' on an automatic in his right hand.

CHAPTER III.

CORNERED.

THE two men with the man with the gun are grinnin', but they don't look any too friendly.

"Havin' a reunion with his old friend Blackout, eh, George?" says the short fat one to the man with the gun.

George nods, and the gun is aimed steady as a rock at my head.

"Very, very touchin'," he says. "I always say, Fred, that a boy's best friend is his mother. But Big Shot, here, goes for horses."

Fred laughs and his stomach jiggles up and down when he does. The third feller is a big, broad-shouldered punk with cauliflower ears, and his mouth hangs open like he's a punch-drunk fighter.

"Do we scramble him now?" he asks.

George shakes his head. "It would be fun, Butch. It would be quite a lot of fun. But I think the boss ought to have a little chat with him first."

All the time my own mouth has been

open and I've been strugglin' to make some kind of a sound. At last my voice comes out in a sort of croakin' noise I never heard before.

"What's eatin' you guys?" I says, tryin' to bluff things out. "There's no harm in my bein' in the stall with Blackout. I trained him for a year... and...and I was just interested in lookin' him over."

Fred, the fat man, laughs and he shakes like a plate of jello. "He's a wit, George...positively a wit," he says. "There should be a big future for him in radio."

George is lookin' at me, his narrow eyes hard as diamonds, and cold. "I don't think he's goin' to have very much of a future, Fred," he says.

"Do we scramble him now?" the dumb prizefighter asks.

"Not now, Butch," says George, his gun still leveled at me. "But we're bein' discourteous to a guest. Eh, Fred? Never keep a man standin' around in a horse stall, I always say." He opens the door of the stall, and slips in quiet like. "Listen, Big Shot," he says in a soft voice, "we're all three goin' to walk out here like pals, understand? I'm goin' to be standin' right beside you, and the fact that my gun will be in my pocket does not mean that I won't blow a hole in your guts if you start anythin'. Understand, Big Shot?"

"Listen," I says, desperate, "I ain't done nothin'. I just come in here to look over Blackout."

God, if these guys were goin' to hold me somewhere...if this ringer runs in the second and the bets is paid off without any one findin' out...

"Jokes," said George, "are never so good when they are repeated. When we walk out of here you turn to the left, and then around the corner of the

barn, and you will start climbing the flight of stairs that leads up to the loft. Get it?" And he jabs the gun so hard in my ribs I nearly let out a yip. But there's nothin' I can do but walk. One look into them pin-point pupils of George's and you'd of knowed he meant business.

Fred, the fat man, drops in on one side and George is on the other, and the dumb prizefighter brings up the rear as we walk out of the stall. God, I would have given five years offen my life if somebody I knew had come around just then. But there wasn't anybody in front of the stable, and I knew if I let out a yip to somebody in the distance it would be all over.

WE walk slow around the corner of the barn, and all the time I can feel George's gun stickin' into my ribs. Then we duck in through a door and up a flight of stairs into a little loft room. There's some loose hay in one corner and an open trapdoor leadin' right down into Blackout's stall...or rather, the stall where the ringer is. There's a couple of old rickety chairs in one corner, and some blankets stretched out in another. Probably one of the stable boys slept on 'em at night. And there's a window on one side, and I get a look out of it. You can see the race track from it... And the crowds is collectin' in the grand stand. It won't be long before the first race is run. And then the second... and then... the works!

"Do we scramble him now?" the prizefighter asks George, kind of eager like.

"You must learn to curb your impatience, Butch," says George. "I want you to park over there at the head of the stairs. Don't let anybody but the boss come up, and be sure that Big

Shot here doesn't leave suddenly." Then George turns to me. "Sit down somewhere, Big Shot. In that pile of hay, if you like." And he walks over, sits down in one of the chairs, tilts it back against the wall, and takes out his gun. All the while he's chewin' on a straw. Fred, the fat man, is at the window.

"The horses for the first race are out in the paddock. You sent some one to find the boss, George?"

"Yes," says George. "Maybe he won't come back to see Big Shot here till after the second race." His eyes never left my face.

I run one of my fingers under the edge of my collar because it felt like I'm chokin'. I've got to get out of here before they start that second race . . . *I've got to!*

"Listen," I say. "I don't know what the gag is, George. I don't know why you're pullin' this strong arm stuff on me. You asked me to stay and watch Blackout, didn't you? If you hadn't of asked me I wouldn't of. All I did was walk into his stall . . . just to look him over. You see, him and me . . ."

"... is old pals," says George, in a dry voice. "Listen, Big Shot. There is no quality in a man I like so much as concentration. And you got it. The way you were looking over that horse down stairs, without getting wise to the fact that the three of us were standing there, watching you, was a wonderful example of what higher education does for a man. You have got some higher education, haven't you, Big Shot?" His voice is soft, with a sharp edge to it. It's like he's mockin' me, and he drawls it out slow and easy.

"They're out in the paddock for the first race," says Fred, at the window. "Got anything laid on this one?"

"Not on *this* one," says George, his hard eyes lookin' at me. "Sit down in the hay, like I told you, Big Shot. You're not going anywhere."

"Bet you three to five Lilac Time takes it," says Fred.

"Done," says George.

I SAT down on the pile of hay. There wasn't nothin' else to do but think, and I was doin' plenty of that. The more I looked around the less chance I could see of gettin' out. Butch was sprawled across the head of the stairs, his mouth hangin' open . . . lookin' as though he wished I'd start somethin'. And George is sittin' there, tilted back in his chair, gun in his lap, chewin' on a straw. And he don't never take his eyes off me.

"They're paradin' out to the post," says Fred, at the window.

And this Fred shows he ain't so dumb about horses. The first is a claimin' race at a mile for platers, and this Lilac Time is a pretty good bet to cop the purse. But I ain't thinkin' about the race. God, in about fifteen minutes this horse downstairs will be coppin' the second, and the jig will be up. There has to be some way out of here . . . but there ain't.

And then I hear some guys in the stall down below me! Guess every muscle in my body went tense. If I could let 'em know I was up here maybe they'd do somethin'. Maybe . . .

George is laughin', soft and nasty. "Don't get your hopes up, Big Shot," he said. "Those gentlemen saddlin' up Blackout know you're up here. They won't do a thing for you."

"They're off!" says Fred, at the widow.

I sit there in the hay, clampin' down on my lower lip with my teeth, and there's hot scaldin' tears forcin' their

way up into my eyes. And it's stiflin' up here in the loft and the sweat is runnin' down my face. This George never takes them glitterin' eyes off me, and Butch, sittin' there at the head of the stairs, could of busted me in two with one hand. I thought, have I got to sit here and take it? Have I got to let 'em get away with this crooked business? Am I gonna fail Mark Gentry when I promised him I'd have the dough for him?

"Lilac Time is running well in the back stretch," says Fred, at the window. "He's fourth . . . now he's third. Queer Dick is running fast in front but he can't last."

Then I begin to wonder about somethin' else. They're goin' to hold me here till after that crooked second race, but what are they gonna do to me then? Are they gonna let me go, knowin' what I do? Even if I promised I wouldn't say nothin', would they let me go? Nobody knowed I'd come out to Beal's barn. Nobody'd seen me! I looked at George and somethin' in those eyes of his told me he wouldn't stop for a second at murder!

"Oh, boy, look at that Lilac Time!" Fred shouts. "He's second now! He's passing Queer Dick as though he was standin' still. Oh, boy, he's in in a walk! Five lengths. Well," and he turns to George and laughs, and his belly shakes, "That's five you owe me," he says.

"I'll pay you," says George, "after the next race."

THE next race! Here it is comin' up. I hear them takin' that black ringer out of the stall below me. They'll be walkin' him out to the pad-dock now, and the crowd will be lookin' him over, and it's a million to one against anybody spottin' the fact that

he ain't Blackout. And then they'll go out to the post, and then they'll be off and this black five year old will run Jeremiah and the rest of 'em right into the ground. And then I can't stand it no more and I jump up out of the hay.

"Listen, George," I says, "you gotta listen to me. I know there ain't no use beatin' around the bush with you. I know you're wise that I spotted this horse of yours is a ringer. But I won't tell no one, so help me God. Only just let me get out of here."

Fred and George look at each other. "He wants us to let him go," says Fred. "And he won't tell a soul! Why, we've known all along that he wasn't going to tell a soul, haven't we, George?"

"Yeah," says George, smilin'.

"But you don't understand," I says, desperate. "There's a girl back in town. She's sick . . . awful sick. We've got to get her on a train for California tonight. She's gotta be operated on, see? And I gotta get the money to her husband before train time or they can't go. Understand, George? It ain't for myself. If I don't get the money to him, she won't be able to go. And she might die. Oh, I know I ain't sayin' it very good, but you've *gotta* let me go on her account."

Fred looks at George. "Have you got a clean handkerchief, George?" he asks. "I always think it's very bad form to cry into a soiled handkerchief."

George is lookin' at me. "You got the money on you?" he asks, quiet.

"No," I says. "I've got to go and get it. That's why you've got to let me out of here."

"You haven't by any chance an old crippled mother who is dependent on you for support?" asks Fred. "You ought to have, you know. It would

make your plight just that much more heartrending."

Then I guess somethin' snapped inside me and I started screamin' at 'em like a crazy man. "You damn crooked rats! Pullin' a game like this... stealin' thousands and thousands of dollars from honest people! Throwin' mud on the whole game of racin'! You think what I told you is funny, eh? You think it's funny to be lyin' on a bed with just one chance for life and a lot of lousy, cheap, tin-horn chisellers like you sittin' calmly around and lettin' you die." I'm shakin' all over as I point a finger at George. "If it's the last thing I ever do I'll get you three baboons; I'll hunt you down if I have to follow you all over the world, and when I get you I'll see to it that you get what's comin' to you with interest. Damn your rotten souls! I hope you rot! I hope you die in terrible agony... I hope you..." and then I stop, on account of I'm out of breath and crazy because I'm so helpless.

"And a Merry Christmas to you," says Fred, and his belly shakes from laughin'.

"Do we scramble him now?" asks Butch from the stairway.

"Shut up and sit down, Butch," says George. All the while I've been yellin' at him, he just leans back in his chair, grinnin', chewin' on that damn straw. "There's an old sayin', Big Shot," he says, "that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. So a whole lot of knowledge must be twice as dangerous. And you know too much, Big Shot. Too damn much. If you're in your right mind, which don't seem likely, you ought to have it figured out by now that you aren't goin' anywhere any time. So just sit down in the hay and put the clamps on your blood pressure."

And then Fred at the window says: "They're in the paddock now, George. In about fifteen minutes you and I are goin' to have to start worryin' about income tax returns."

CHAPTER IV.

THE PAY OFF.

I GUESS up to that minute I'd been doin' most of my worryin' about the bet I've got on Jeremiah, and how I'm goin' to lose it, and how Mary Gentry ain't goin' to have the dough to get to California. But as I sit down again in the hay and I look at George sittin' there back against the wall with that straw bobbin' up and down between his lips, I begin to see that there's more at stake than I figured. These guys are goin' to slip me the bump. They're just waitin' for the okay from their boss, Larry Beal.

Two hundred thousand bucks is bet on this ringer at odds rangin' from 50 to 1 all the way to 3 to 2, Pete Gallivan has told me. Suppose the average of the odds they get is 10 to 1, which probably ain't far off, these muggs stand to clean up close to two million bucks. There's probably six or eight of 'em in on the split... all goin' to collect somewhere in the neighborhood of a quarter of a million bucks apiece. Well, it's a cinch they ain't goin' to let a little thing like the life of Speed Hallor, horse trainer out of a job, stand in their way.

I take out a cigarette and light it and start smokin' nervous. If ever the old bean had to work for me, it was now. And then I think, "You damn fool, smokin' in a hay loft! You must be nuts!"

Anybody that's used to workin' around a stable would know better

than to be smokin' in a place like this. I reach out to crush out the butt on the floor boards...only I don't do it! Because just at that moment an idea hits me. A desperate idea, but there's just a chance it might work.

Fred is still at the window.

"They're paradin' out toward the track, George," he says. "You better not miss this. It's just goin' to be about the sweetest sight of a lifetime."

The front legs of George's chair plop down on the floor and he stands up. The gun hangs loose in his right hand, his forefinger hooked through the trigger guard. He looks at me and grins and walks over to the window by Fred without sayin' nothin'. And for the first time there's only one guy actually lookin' at me and that's Butch, the dumb prizefighter, and he keeps lookin' over at Fred as though he's lookin' for some news of the race.

Well, I take a couple of deep drags on my cigarette until the end is glowing red, and then I do somethin' I never thought I'd ever do. I drop that lighted butt down through that open trap door into the stall below. I guess if there'd been a horse down there I couldn't of done it, even under the circumstances. But that ringer is already paradin' out to the track. I'd noticed, when I was in that stall, that the floor was covered with nice clean dry straw about a foot thick. With any kind of luck that lighted butt would start a fire that would burn like crazy. And there's about a hundred and fifty thousand worth of horse flesh in this barn. There'd be excitement...plenty of excitement. The only thing that would give me a chance to get out of this spot.

I ain't much of a guy for prayin'. But I'm prayin' now...prayin' for somethin' to happen that every horse-

man in the world prays *won't* happen. Fire! That butt had to catch...and catch quick.

I'M watchin' Fred and George now... watchin' 'em close. Fred don't never take his eye off the race track out there, and he's chucklin' and laughin' to himself. George turns around to look at me a couple times, smilin' that nasty, slow smile, but I'm lyin' there in the hay like I made up my mind to take what's comin' to me. And pretty soon he don't look again. And then I feel every muscle in my body go tense. I can hear the faint crackle of fire down below.

"You gotta wait, Speed... you gotta wait!" I tell myself, and I'm bitin' my lower lip so hard I can feel my teeth sink right into the flesh.

Fred and George is focused on the window now, payin' no attention to me. Only Butch, sprawled across the head of the stairs, is watchin' with that dumb, open mouthed face of his never changin' expression. Down below the sound of the fire is growin' louder and louder. I hear a horse whinny. And then, all of a sudden, up through the trap door comes a cloud of smoke.

Butch lets out a yell. "Hey, George! Fire!"

And that was my cue. I don't wait for nothin'. I just roll over and dive head first down through that open trap door into what looks like a furnace. I give myself some kind of a twist so that I light flat on my back in the middle of the fire, and for just a minute I thought it was all over. It's probably an eight-foot drop, and the wind is knocked out of me and all around me is this straw blazin' clear up to the ceiling. I hear George and the others yellin' from upstairs and then I hear that gun of George's barkin'.

I'm half groggy, but I manage to stagger up to my feet, coverin' my face with my hands, and take it on the lam out into the open. People are runnin' from everywhere, shoutin' and yellin'. I get a glimpse of men runnin' into the other stalls where all the horses is raisin' almighty hell by now. But I don't stop for nothin'.

I guess I must of been a crazy sight as I started tearin' toward the track, slappin' at my clothes tryin' to put out the fire that's caught onto them. And then somethin' cracks me in the shoulder and I take a divin' summersault in the grass . . . and only when I'm tryin' to drag myself up to my feet do I realize that what hit me is a bullet from George's gun. I give a quick look around and I see him and Fred and Butch tearin' across the lot from the barn. And then a bullet rips up the ground right next to me and I realize that in the excitement George is goin' to take a chance on pluggin' me. Even if they caught him he could say I was the one who lit the fire . . . and if I'm dead there ain't goin' to be any come-back.

God, my shoulder feels like a red hot knife is stickin' into it . . . but somehow I manage to get up and keep goin'. Everythin' is a sort of blur to me, and I guess there was tears rollin' down my face and I know I was chokin' down some kind of hysterical sobbin' that wouldn't stay choked. My left arm don't work at all, and I can feel the warm blood runnin' down inside my shirt. But I got to get away . . . *I got to!* I duck around the corner of a barn, still headin' toward the track. If only some one I know will show up . . . but they don't. And everyone I see is runnin' in the other direction from me toward the fire. I hear the siren of the track fire engine

. . . I hear the crowd in the grand stand yellin' with excitement. Wham! George had rounded the barn now and a bullet from his gun tears a big gash in the wood right next to my head.

I GOTTA get away!" I'm blubberin'. And I'm staggerin' on with my left arm hangin' loose from my shoulder like a string of sausages. I'm in the clear now, runnin' along the outside rail of the track. But I'm gettin' a break now. There's quite a crowd here and maybe George won't dare keep on his shootin'. If I can just keep goin' long enough to get to the judges' stand. The whole damn place is goin' around like I was ridin' on a ferris wheel. Everythin' looks cockeyed . . . faces, and buildin's, and everything is all out of shape. My eyes is burnin' from the salty sweat runnin' into 'em and I ain't even got the strength to lift up my good arm to wipe 'em clear. And then I see I'm gonna be too late. That second race has started!

The crowd is goin' crazy, trying to watch the race and the fire at the same time. I can see the horses comin' down the back stretch and it's a crime! That black ringer is about four lengths in front with the jockey damn near sawin' the mouth off him so it won't look too bad. But the black horse is runnin' like mad and I can see the whites of his eyes glarin' and blood and foam flyin' from his mouth. The fire, the excitement, the siren . . . I guess all of them had scared the pants off this ringer and he's goin' just as tight as he can go. In the dust behind him . . . five lengths now . . . I see old man Hornbostle's colors. Jeremiah is tryin' to make a race of it, but he ain't got a chance.

I'm right opposite the judges' stand

now and I know I can't wait . . . the way things is goin' round and round. I climb up on the rail. Some guy tries to pull me down and I let him have the heel of my shoe right in the kisser. A yell like thunder goes up from the crowd as I start staggerin' across the track. And then, like a nightmare, I see that black ringer bearin' down on me. I can hear myself yellin' like a maniac only I can't make out what I'm sayin'. And then that black horse hit me like four thousand tons of brick. One of his knees, like the piston of a locomotive, hits me in the ribs and I can hear 'em splinter. The rest of the horses went tearin' by me in a cloud of dust. I guess the last thing I knew was that Beal's ringer had won the race by about six lengths.

WELL, when I opened my eyes I don't hear a sound. All I know is I've got to get up to the judges' stand. I try to move and about a million pains hit me all at once. And then I hear someone say, "Take it easy, kid." And I recognize Pete Gallivan's voice. I'm wonderin' what he's doin' here, when everything kind of clears up and I realize I'm in bed . . . in the hospital. I turn my head and see Pete sittin' beside the bed. Then I groan.

"They paid off on Blackout, eh, Pete?" I asks him.

Pete laughs. "No, you darned old son of a gun, they didn't pay off on Blackout. They might of paid off on him if you weren't such a damned talkative guy that you keep right on talkin' after you're dead."

"What?"

"Listen," he says. "You might as well get things straight. This is Saturday. You've been unconscious for three days. But when they picked you

up out on the track you were still talkin' a blue streak . . . and sayin' enough so they decided to do a little investigatin'. That bullet wound in your shoulder kind of added authority to what you was sayin'. So they nosed around, found out it *was* a ringer, and paid off on Jeremiah . . . which means I owe you five hundred and eighty bucks."

Well, I feel pretty good until I think of Mark and Mary Gentry. And then I start groanin' again. "Those poor kids," I says, "waitin' for me to show up with the dough . . . and me here . . ."

Pete laughs again. "I tell you, Speed, you can't stop talkin' even when you're supposed to be dead. You was hollerin' as much about them Gentrys as you was about Beal's ringer. Well, old man Hornbostle kind of figured he owed you somethin', kid . . . seein' as how he won fifty grand on Jeremiah. So he hotfooted down to the Gentrys and slips your friend Mark the dough to make the night train for the West."

"And how about them rod men of Beale's," I ask.

Pete grins. "A plainclothes man hops this George guy just when he's about to fill you full of lead while you're lyin' out there on the track. They got the other two later. But Beal managed to get away. They'll get him sooner or later."

"You'll pay back old man Hornbostle out of my winnin's, Pete," I says.

"Listen, kid," he says, "that's chicken feed. The Saratoga Jockey Club has a standin' offer of five grand to anyone who shows up anythin' crooked connected with the racin' here. You won it, kid. It's in the bank, in your name."

THE END



A True Story in Pictures Every Week

108



Next Week: The Fighting Garibaldis



It was not easy to shoot
a man in cold blood

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Sink of Iniquity

*No one but Leggy had ever
heard the Boss of Bom Suc-
cesso beg for a favor—and
for that Leggy paid dearly*

This story began in the Argosy for May 25

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

NO one could have been more surprised than Leggy (Matt McArdle, ex-sergeant of detectives) to see his old hated enemy, Jack Beatty, down in the Amazonas country far from their native U. S. A.

Leggy, now a wanderer and roustabout, having been thrown off the police force for shady activities, asks Beatty for a job, knowing that he runs a gambling joint in

Bom Successo, an inland town which is little more than a refuge for wanted men and lawless toughs.

Beatty is known among the natives as Torrenegro (Blacktower), King of Bom Successo. They look to him for protection, knowing that he has an "agreement" with the governor of that rubber-growing province. Leggy is hired by Beatty as a house-servant.

Though the job is humiliating, Leggy is glad of the opportunity to keep an eye on Beatty. It also means that he can see occasionally Fay La Rosadora, whom he knew at one time, and with whom he is still in love.

Blacktower gives a dinner-party for Rosadora. Among those present are Manoel, Fay's crafty theatrical manager, his wife, Pepita, Gene Buckles, an English physician, and Duke Hammill, a gambler. Each of the men is attracted to Rosadora, but evidently she will have none of them. In particular she refuses Blacktower's attentions after he has offered her a diamond bracelet.

Soon after the dinner-party, Beatty sends Leggy to Rosadora's hotel with a message in order to get an idea of the layout for some scheme he has been considering.

There Leggy makes a friend of Ria, a servant, and on the way back encounters Bill Keene, a stranded American, who is in bad shape physically.

CHAPTER V (*Continued*).

STRANGE WHITE MAN.

A WHITE man! he thought; and worse off than I am. If I could pull him out of the hole he would be my man. The first violence of the shaking having passed, Leggy said, "You seem to have it bad, Jack."

A harsh croak of laughter issued from the ground. "Boy! you ought to see me when I get good and going!"

Leggy was surprised by the laugh. The rattling voice sounded young. A game chicken, he thought. "Have you seen the doctor?" he asked.

"Just landed," said the other. "Cleaned. Got nothing to give the doctor."

"That don't matter," said Leggy. "He's a white man. Wait here till I get back."

"Wait!" said the other, with his cracked laugh. "Can you see me running away, 'bo?"

Leggy left the wheelbarrow standing. The laboratory was less than two hundred yards up street. He found Doc in the ovenlike room with the sweat running down his naked breast, busy with his test tubes.

"Silly, isn't it?" he said, indicating his occupation. "Promising young investigator ruined by drink! Oh, hell! If there's a bigger fool than me on earth, I'd pay admission to have a look at him."

Leggy told him about the sick man.

"Well, what do you come to me for?" he asked.

"Quinine."

"Too late for that when the fit has him. After it passes what he wants is light food and sleep. He's probably starving. Let him come to me a few hours before his next chill is due, and I'll dope him up."

"Where can he eat and sleep?"

"You can search me, blue eyes," said Doc, with his bitter grin. "The eleemosynary provisions at Bum Success were somehow overlooked."

"Can you give me any old clothes for him?" asked Leggy. "I have nothing myself."

DIGGING among his things, Doc produced a torn undershirt and a faded pair of dungarees. "Now get out!" he said. "I'm on the track of something."

He returned to the test tubes.

Back with the sick man, Leggy

found that the shaking fit had passed. He lay on the ground exhausted and gasping. Leggy stood looking down at him and debating what to do, while the wheelbarrow dripped. He decided to take a chance. Blacktower would not return from the theater for another hour, and always went directly to the gambling hall. He never came into the kitchen of his house, or visited that part of the veranda where the servants slept.

Leggy lifted the sick man under the arms, and deposited him in the wheelbarrow with his back against the cake of ice. On the way home he had not to pass through the crowded part of the camp. The few who saw him with his burden thought nothing of it. A sick man or a drunk in an improvised ambulance. Who cared?

The sound of his barrow trundling around the dark veranda was familiar to all. In the kitchen Chou and George raised their eyebrows, but said nothing. There was a spirit of live and let live among Blacktower's servants. None of them was in a position to carry tales.

"Pal of mine," said Leggy.

"Don't let the boss see him."

"Not a chance! He can have my hammock."

"Better give him a bath first."

Leggy fed the sick man, helped him to bathe, dressed him in the clean clothes, and led him staggering with weakness and weariness to his hammock. He was instantly asleep.

When his day's work was done, Leggy stretched himself on the floor beneath the hammock. Waking in the night and hearing no sound of breathing above, he said softly, "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"How you feel?"

"My head is clear. I'll be all right until the next round."

"When is that?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"We'll stall it off with quinine. . . . What's your name?"

"Bill Keene."

"American?"

"Sure!"

"Thought so. Same here. I'm called Leggy hereabouts."

"You're a white man, Leggy."

"Aw, cut it out! How did you come here, Bill?"

"It's a long story, Leggy. I'll tell you bit by bit. . . . I'm a construction engineer, see? I was on a job in Lima, but I got fed up with cities, and when we were paid off me and my side-kick made up our minds to cross the Andes and go down the rivers until we fetched the Atlantic Ocean. We didn't know what we were tackling. It must be three thousand miles from there to here, and a couple more thousand to the Atlantic.

"I T was grand at first; talk about shooting the chutes! Indian crew. After a couple of hundred miles they deserted, and we were left on our own. But they were gentlemen. Only swiped half our outfit. Later we lost the whole damn thing in a rapid, and went to work for a rubber trader. He staked us to another outfit, and we got a crew, real wild babies, these were, and went three or four hundred miles up a river that had never been entered by white men. One night our crew vamoosed with every blessed thing we owned except a couple of machetes. It's a way they have. There we were!"

"What did you do?"

"I can scarcely tell you, Leggy. Stumbled in circles around the jungle,

starving, sick, covered with sores, raving. In the end by dumb luck we stumbled on a *chacra* belonging to some Indians; those are the little clearings they make to raise their vegetables and bananas. There was nobody home, so we fed and rested up. Nobody ever did show up; I suppose they were afraid of us.

"There was plenty of rubber in the neighborhood, so we stayed on. We stayed on for a year, eating the Indians' store of grub and collecting rubber. I never want to see another banana! We got a ton and a half of rubber, made a rough boat, descended the river, and cashed in at the trader's.

"Then we started out for God's country. But we were attacked by some savages on the upper Madeira, and my partner was killed. I escaped by swimming. So there I was left flat again. Alone this time. Didn't seem to have the same incentive to get up and git. It was a rapid river, so I lashed a sort of raft together with bushrope, and sat on it and let her go. Anywhere at all. I almost settled the old question: how long can a man go without eating? Two weeks, anyhow. Met a couple of rubber-gatherers who fed me, but it only made me sick then. Met another crew later and they brought me here and laid me where you found me."

"Gosh!" said Leggy. "And I thought I'd been through the mill!"

"That's only the outline, fellow. Wait till I fill it in. Anacondas thirty feet long; jaguars, cannibals, head-hunters, poison blow-guns; all the fixings. . . . Reckon I better go to sleep now."

"Sure! We'll talk tomorrow."

The next day Leggy roused his friend while Chou and George still slept. When he was shaved and clipped

up a bit, Bill Keene was revealed as a long lad with a gaunt face marked in mirthful lines. He was younger than Leggy.

They ate some more cold food and went out into the silent street. By day it was not so easy to talk to each other, but there was good friendly feeling between them.

As soon as On Kai Ling opened his store, and took his place at the table inside, Leggy led his friend in to him. "Here's a white man, Uncle Ling," he said. "He's a bit pulled down by fever, but he's an able man. Will you give him the job you offered me?"

The old man looked Bill over with the shrewd little eyes twinkling in fat. "No," he said pleasantly, "not that job. But I got plenty jobs for good men. I talk to him."

Leggy took this as a hint, and went out and sat on the pier until Bill appeared half an hour later. He was carrying a pair of new shoes by their laces, which was a good sign. He sat down on the pier to put them on.

"Badges of manhood," he said humorously. "Gosh, how they hurt!"

"What did the old man say?" asked Leggy.

"I'm hired."

"What as?"

"General handy man. These Chinks are first-rate storekeepers, but they all got butter fingers with tools. He wants new shelves put up in the store. He's got a gasoline pump that won't work, and God knows what all. Said I could build me a little screened shack alongside the warehouse and eat at the short-order restaurant."

"Pretty soft," said Leggy.

"Say, Leggy," Bill went on, much embarrassed, "I can't tell you how..."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Bill!" inter-

rupted Leggy. "Say, Bill, let's keep it dark that you and I are pals, see?"

"Okay," said Bill. "But what for?"

"I got a hunch that it would be safer in this hell-hole. Men stick together here for what there may be in it, but no man has a friend that he sets any store by. He daren't. If you and I went around as pals it would attract too much attention. The best way to survive here is not to attract attention."

"Well, if you say so," said Bill; "but I'm a fellow who likes to let himself go."

"So was I once," said Leggy. "That is all right. If you build your shelter at the far end of the warehouse it's well out of the way. I can come down nights for a while and we can smoke and chin."

"Right!" said Bill.

CHAPTER VI.

STRANGE PLANS.

FOR several days all Leggy's watching yielded him no information as to what the boss was plotting. That he *was* plotting Leggy never doubted, for Blacktower was not the man to give up anything he had set his heart on. Behind that cold and cagy exterior Leggy guessed that he hid an insane passion that was ready to wreck the world sooner than give up its object.

Blacktower went to the theater each night, where he presumably sat with Fay under the eyes of Pepita. Once again Leggy was drawn under the wall at night to listen to her singing, but the feelings that it roused were too violent. They didn't jibe with the necessity of keeping a cool head. So he

never went back. He was training himself not to think of her. Not easy when he woke up in his hammock during the breathless torrid nights.

During this time Blacktower made one move that might or might not mean something. He ordered the four gamblers who shared a couple of rooms in his house to move into some unoccupied rooms in the front building. He needed the space, he said. They obeyed, grumbling behind his back.

Finally the steamboat returned after another trip to Manaos, bringing Blacktower all sorts of packages, and next day the reason for the delay in his plans became clear.

Leggy was awakened in his hammock at daybreak by Blacktower himself. He got a nasty start upon opening his eyes to perceive the saturnine face looking down at him. A man is caught at a disadvantage in his sleep. Leggy wondered if he had given anything away at the moment of waking. Blacktower merely jerked his head as a sign that he was to get up and follow him. How thankful Leggy was that it was not the morning when Bill Keene had been sleeping there.

He was led upstairs. Blacktower's big room, open to the air on all four sides, was cool and fresh. His bed stood at one end, closed off by bamboo portières. Early as it was, he was already wearing the formal black silk suit and stiff collar.

Leggy guessed that he had not been to bed. There was an ash tray on the desk completely filled with cigar butts. On the desk stood a plain wooden box that had not been there the night before.

Blacktower sat down. "They tell me you're sore," he said with his sarcastic smile, "because you're not getting regular wages."

"It's only natural," he said. "But I never let it on to anybody."

"Well, I'll have a job for you during the next few days," said Blacktower. "If you can pull it off without letting me down, we'll talk about wages."

Leggy's throat tightened. Now it's coming! he thought. "Certainly am obliged," he mumbled.

"Wait till you get it," said Blacktower coolly. "Can you handle tools?"

"I'm no carpenter," said Leggy. "But I'm average handy."

"There are tools in this box," said Blacktower, rapping it; "machado, hatchet, and so on. Take it and put it in my canoe. It's tied to the east side of the pier. You will know it because it's got a B painted on the bow."

"I know it," said Leggy. "I fetched charcoal in it for Chou."

"I want you to take a day off," said Blacktower, "and go up the river and make me a ladder."

Leggy had himself under good control. He looked Blacktower in the eye.

"... Eighteen feet long," Blacktower went on. "You'll find a foot rule in the box. No, make it twenty, in order to be on the safe side. You'll find bamboo growing everywhere, but I want you to go well outside of camp. Go up one of the igaripis, so that anybody passing in the main stream can't see what you're doing. Do you get me?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll find good dry poles in every clump. Make sure they are sound from end to end. The poles and the cross pieces must be notched and fitted together, for it's got to be strong. It's got to bear up a heavy weight. The cross pieces must be bolted to the poles. Bolts are in the box. The best way to make holes is by burning.

Build a little fire and heat the irons you'll find for that purpose. When your ladder is finished stand it up against a tree and jump on each rung." Blacktower's eyes glittered. "If that ladder was to fail me," he said quietly, "I'd kill you by inches."

Leggy made out to throw him a scared look.

"I get you," he muttered.

"Go on, then," said Blacktower. "If anybody's curious, tell them you're going fishing. Better take some lines and bring back a string, for a stall. When your ladder's finished, hide it in such a way that you can get it when you want it. Leave the tools with it. You can fetch them some time later. Report to me as soon as you come back."

"If you're asleep, do you want me to wake you?" asked Leggy.

"Yes."

LEGGY set off in the canoe. Bom Successo had no suburbs. As soon as you turned the first bend in the river you were walled by the unbroken jungle. He took care to go far enough away so that the strokes of his machado could not be heard in camp.

All day while he worked in the steaming jungle he had plenty of time to think things over. He made an honest ladder, knowing that he would have to find a better expedient than a broken rung to meet the situation.

The great question in his mind was, did Blacktower intend to take him along on this expedition with the ladder? Or would he be left at home? He would have to be prepared to meet either situation. Or any other situation.

Leggy would not admit the idea of shooting Blacktower, except as a last

resort. His fixed resolve to put the man behind the bars stood in the way. He was as keen to preserve Blacktower's life as if he had loved the man. And anyhow, if the strong hand failed, they said the caboclos would break loose, and that that would be the end of the whites at Bom Successo.

By the time he had finished his work Leggy had doped out a rough plan. Like a good many grim things, it had its comic side. If Blacktower takes me with him, he thought with a hard grin, I'll get Bill Keene to turn the trick. If he leaves me at home, I'll do it myself.

Leggy assumed that Blacktower intended ascending the creek in a canoe, in order to reach the back of the hotel. It would be the only way he could transport a ladder unseen. What Leggy could not puzzle out was, how did Blacktower expect to get away with it if the girl resisted and made a racket? He couldn't land with her in camp, and there was no place outside of camp except the jungle. Remembering Blacktower's softened manner in her presence, Leggy didn't believe that he planned to hurt her.

It was four o'clock when he got home. Blacktower had cut out the afternoon siesta, and Leggy found him sitting at his desk upstairs, as before. He had shed coat and collar, a little thing but significant, because it was a point of pride with him never to be seen except in full regalia. I am getting closer to him than he realizes, thought Leggy. Woo-hoo, the little Pekinese, was playing about the room.

Leggy's sharpened eyes took note of a druggist's bottle on the desk that had not been there before. It contained a colorless liquid, and the cork had lately been drawn. The label had been scraped off with a knife. Allow-

ing his eyes to stray around carelessly, Leggy perceived the scrapings of paper mixed with cigar ashes in a tray.

While he was making a report of the day's work to Blacktower, he noticed that the latter's eyes were following the movements of the little dog around the room. It was more than just an idle glance; he was watching the dog with hard intentness. Presently his eyes dropped in a satisfied way. Leggy waited a moment or two and looked around. The dog had fallen asleep on the floor.

When Blacktower dismissed him, Leggy, in order to make sure of what he suspected, made believe to be struck by the dog's attitude. He approached him, saying, "The little fellow don't look right, boss. He's sick."

"Let him alone," growled Blacktower. "He's only asleep."

So that's it! thought Leggy on his way downstairs. Fay is to be drugged. He's experimenting with the dog to find out how long it is before the stuff takes effect, and how long the effect will last.

AN hour and a half later Blacktower's bell sounded through the house; two strokes for Leggy. When he entered the room the little dog was playing around as usual. He seemed unharmed. Blacktower, notwithstanding his self-control, betrayed signs of excitement.

"How long would it take you to fetch the ladder?" he asked.

Leggy hardened himself to take what was coming. "Half an hour to go and half an hour to come, boss."

"Could you find it in the dark?"

"Sure, with an acetylene flash."

Blacktower stood up suddenly.

Leggy thought: he has nerves like anybody else.

"All right! I'll be needing it to-night," Blacktower said, showing his teeth.

A pulse thumped in Leggy's ears. He needed more time! More time!

"Go to your hammock and get a couple of hours' sleep," said Blacktower.

Sleep! thought Leggy. With this hanging over me!

"... Get yourself a good feed and start out after dark, say half past eight or nine. I don't want it until eleven, but I can't risk any slip-up. You must give yourself an hour or more to spare ... Wait a minute! Before you start for the ladder go out on the end of the pier. You'll find a pile of planks there. Slip a couple of them in the water without making any noise, and retrieve them with the canoe. I shall want them as well as the ladder. Cache the planks while you're fetching the ladder. Are you getting all this?"

Leggy nodded.

"I want you to be waiting for me at eleven-fifteen. Neither a minute earlier nor later."

"I have no watch," said Leggy woodenly.

Blacktower coolly handed over his watch. "Take this. You must wait for me on the creek shore at the opening between the ice plant and the bunk house next door. At that hour the bunk house will be empty. If you hear me whistling a tune, you'll know that there is somebody about, and you'll have to wait for me. I'll whistle the song that La Rosadora sings every night: 'Newsboy's Love Song.' It goes like this—"

"I know it," muttered Leggy with stiff lips.

"I'll take the canoe from you then, with the ladder and the planks, and you can beat it."

"Where to?"

"Come back to the house for your wheelbarrow, just like you do when you're going for ice," said Blacktower, grinning. "But don't get any ice. Wait for me with the wheelbarrow in the space between the ice plant and the bunk house, and keep a sharp lookout in the plaza."

"I'll be back in forty minutes or so; an hour at the outside. As I approach the shore I'll whistle a few bars of the same tune and break off. If the coast is clear, you pick it up where I break off, see? I won't land unless I hear you whistle. Have you got it straight?"

Leggy nodded.

"Go get your sleep, then. Come back to me before you start out and we'll go over it again."

Leggy left the room. He was thinking: I won't have to call on Bill Keene. It's safer to play a lone hand.

CHAPTER VII.

A SHARE IN THE BUSINESS.

PRECISELY at quarter past eleven by Blacktower's watch, Leggy grounded the canoe in the mud at the appointed spot on the creek shore. He had the two planks laid across the stern of the canoe, and he was towing the bamboo ladder.

Blacktower immediately stepped out of the shadow of the buildings.

"The plaza is empty," he whispered. "Go get your wheelbarrow and wait between the two buildings. Keep out of sight of the plaza."

"Yes, sir," said Leggy.

"Do you bring something to cover the ice with?" he asked.

Leggy could hear the hard grin in his voice. "I can," he answered.

"All right. A big piece of canvas or a blanket."

Leggy noted that he was still wearing the top hat and the long coat. A funny costume to go adventuring in. Probably he had come direct from the theater. When he got into the canoe Blacktower removed his upper garments.

Pushing the canoe free from the mud, Leggy waited for a moment to watch Blacktower. The gambler was no expert with the paddle. He kept shifting it from side to side. At this stage of the water the channel of the creek was tortuous above, and Leggy foresaw that he would be in continual difficulties with the muddy shoals. I shall have plenty of time, he thought with satisfaction.

Blacktower was swallowed up in the darkness. Leggy returned home, brought the wheelbarrow out, and hid it behind a shack where he could pick it up readily on the way back. He then hastened through the back ways of the camp towards the theater. There were no lights out of doors, and he met nobody but a furtive figure or two, no less anxious to escape recognition than himself.

He had to cross the noisy Avenida at the corner of the theater. So far as he could tell, nobody recognized him under the lights. The theater was closed for the night. It presented its longest side to the Avenida, and the lane leading to the hanging bridge passed in front of it. Leggy paused at the far corner of the building to make sure he was not observed. Nobody was near.

Slipping around the corner, he made his way back along the top of the bank, feeling his way by the wooden wall. It was completely dark on this side. There was a rank growth of weeds

and thorns on the bank, but that was a minor difficulty.

In the rear of the theater the hotel galleries jutted out over the bank. When he stood at the top of the bank, Leggy was almost on a level with the first floor gallery, but the end of the structure was boarded up to prevent entrance from this side.

He ducked under the floor. A foul smell of muck filled his nostrils. Should he be forced to descend into the muck, he realized that it would betray him afterwards, so he took off pants and shoes and rolled them into a bundle, handy to his hand.

He squatted down to wait for Blacktower, gun in hand. The jungle was quiet, except for the far-off cry of a howler.

The noises of camp came to him muffled by the floor overhead. His whole life seemed to pass in review before his keyed-up faculties. Mostly his thoughts were of Fay. He stretched his ears to catch any tremor of movement; he could hear nothing. But if Blacktower's plans were working out, Fay was already sunk in a drugged sleep.

So long a time passed that he began to fear Blacktower must have given up his plan. At last he heard the splash of Blacktower's paddle before he saw him. He crept down nearer to the piles that supported the veranda. The narrow stream in the middle of its wide bed of mud reflected a little light from the sky, and Leggy saw the long black shape of the canoe pass across it like some great swimming creature. The beating of his heart quieted down.

BLACKTOWER grounded his craft. He lifted one of the planks and laid it softly across the mud. He stepped out on the first

plank, carrying the second in his arms, and carefully lowered it in its place. It was at that moment that Leggy had planned to fire, but Blacktower was only a dim shape in the dark and the danger of missing him was too great—not to speak of the risk of hitting him in a vital spot. Leggy felt a curious tenderness for his enemy.

Leggy waited for him to return to the canoe and fetch the ladder ashore. Blacktower planted it in the mud, and let the top fall softly against the rail of the veranda overhead. Leggy was no more than a couple of yards from him. He found it none too easy to shoot a man in cold blood. He had a vision of the bullet tearing its way through living flesh. Nevertheless, when Blacktower mounted the ladder, Leggy extended his arm until the gun was almost touching the man's thigh, and pulled the trigger.

The report shattered the stillness, Blacktower dropped like a stone. So rigid was the man's self-control that no sound escaped him. Leggy, fearing that he might make a light, clambered swiftly up the bank and concealed himself under the floor beams. However, Blacktower had his own reasons for not wishing to call attention to himself. He lay still. There was a deathly silence. Leggy heard voices at an upper window of the hotel. They faded away again.

In Bom Successo the first rule of conduct was always: mind your own business.

Leggy crept down the bank again. Blacktower still lay huddled at the foot of the ladder. He suppressed his groans, but he could not stifle his labored breathing. A new anxiety filled Leggy. Suppose the man was unable to help himself, what would he do? If Blacktower were discovered lying

there by daylight all hell would break loose in camp, yet Leggy could make no move to aid him.

Blacktower began to drag himself a foot at a time along the planks towards the canoe. Leggy released his pent-up breath. Blacktower rolled himself into the canoe and, picking up the paddle, contrived to push himself off the mud. Going back, there was a sluggish current to aid him. He was swallowed up in the darkness, and a load was lifted from Leggy's breast.

Leggy lifted down the light ladder and, carrying it under the gallery, laid it along the house wall at the top of the bank. The two planks followed it. They would never be found here unless somebody went searching for them. He drew on pants and shoes and ran back the way he had come.

Five minutes later he was in the spot where Blacktower had left him. His wheelbarrow was hidden behind. A long time passed before the black shadow shaped itself out of the darkness. Blacktower was scarce able to wield the paddle. He forgot the agreed signal. He was in danger of being carried out into the river, and Leggy, chancing the man-eating fish, ran into the water a little way, and seizing the bow of the canoe pulled it ashore.

Blacktower sunk down into the bottom.

"Help me," he muttered. "I've been shot."

"I heard the shot!" said Leggy, with an innocent air. "What happened?"

"None of your damned business," snarled Blacktower. "All you got to do is help me home."

LEGGY brought the wheelbarrow down to the edge of the firm ground, and half lifted, half dragged Blacktower ashore. No whim-

per of pain escaped the wounded man. Leggy loaded him into the wheelbarrow and, covering him with the piece of canvas he had brought, started home. At this end of camp there was nobody stirring. The grim smile played around Leggy's lips. This was not the load that Blacktower had planned for him to carry home in his wheelbarrow.

When they circled the veranda of the gambling hall, play was going on inside. The trundling of Leggy's wheelbarrow was such a familiar sound, nobody looked out. Chou and George were asleep long ago, and the house was quiet. Leggy took Blacktower on his back to get him up the stairs, and laid him on his bed.

The wound had bled profusely, and he was in bad shape. He had pulled off his shirt and torn it into strips to tie around his leg. His lean torso was as smooth and hard as a youth's. Leggy cut away the bloody bandages and clothes. The bullet had gone clean through the fleshy part of the thigh. Not a serious wound, but in that climate there was always danger of infection.

Blacktower pointed out where the first-aid kit was kept.

"Go wash the blood out of the canoe," he commanded, "and tie it in its usual place. Roll up the bloody clothes in a bundle and throw them in the river."

"Got to dress your wound first," said Leggy.

"Do what I tell you!" cried Blacktower. "I'll tend to myself."

Leggy merely grinned at him. It gave him a pleasant sense of power to defy the wounded Blacktower.

"Keep your shirt on," he said. "The boat won't take any harm by being left for half an hour."

Blacktower started up angrily.

"Damn you!" . . . A twinge of pain cut him short. He fell back and let Leggy have his way.

Leggy made all ready to wash and dress the wound.

"Can you stand letting me probe it with a swab of iodine?" he asked.

"Go ahead," muttered Blacktower.

During the painful operation he gripped the sides of the bed and ground his teeth together. Leggy went about his work swiftly and expertly. He had a feeling of proprietorship towards his patient. Got him where I want him now!

When the worst was over, Blacktower opened his eyes.

"Where did you get your skill in doctoring?" he asked.

"It's part of the training," said Leggy.

Something new began to stew in Blacktower's skull. His dark eyes followed Leggy's movements full of craft.

"You're a good fellow, Leggy," he said with false friendliness. "You're as good nursing as a woman. I'm lucky to have you here."

Leggy grinned and said nothing.

"I know who it was had me shot," said Blacktower darkly.

Leggy thought: The hell you do!

"If you'll see me through this, I'll make it well worth your while! Keep your mouth shut, see? The man who shot me couldn't see my face. If you keep your mouth shut they can't bring nothing home to me."

"There's your wound," said Leggy.

Blacktower brought his teeth together. "I'll bluff it out. Nobody is to know I'm wounded but you. . . . 'Tain't a question of wages now," he went on, buttering his voice. "If you stand by me, I'll give you a share in

the business. You'll be my right-hand man."

Leggy went on grinning. Oh, yes, he thought, now that you need me! He said, "Sure, I'm your man, boss. Whatever you say goes with me!"

"Get the keys out of my pants and open the top right-hand drawer of my desk," commanded Blacktower.

Leggy obeyed. The drawer held a gun that he coveted; one of the new stubby automatics; blued steel; .38 caliber.

"It's yours," said Blacktower, grinning. "There's a box of shells at the back of the drawer."

"Gee, boss!" said Leggy, making his face beam like the sun. Behind it he waited tensely for what was coming next.

Pain and hatred made Blacktower's grin look wolfish.

"If Manoel was to die sudden, your fortune would be made," he said coolly.

"Gosh, boss! How could a fellow get him?"

"That's up to the fellow," he said callously. "Understand, if the fellow missed him, or got caught, I'd wash my hands of him."

"Sure," said Leggy. "I'm acquainted with a fellow who will do his damndest, boss."

"That's all right," said Blacktower. "I'll give him a week. At the end of that time I'll get another fellow."

CHAPTER VIII.

WATCHFUL WAITING.

ON the following day Blacktower remained in bed. This was not sufficiently unusual to arouse comment among his employees. At night, when Leggy had dressed his

wound, he insisted on putting on his clothes; and at the usual hour departed for the theater, tight-lipped and sweating with pain, but walking without any suggestion of a limp. Leggy watched his erect figure crossing the bridge with a grudging admiration.

Certainly the brute was game!

After a little while Leggy followed him to the theater. Springing for the top of the wall, he drew himself up until he could get a slant inside. There they sat, the four of them, at a table—Blacktower, Manoel, Pepita, and Fay—all smiling with made-to-order friendliness; each watchful behind the smile.

Leggy dropped back, grinning, too. Grim comedy; and only he possessed the key to it.

Bill Keene had finished his lean-to at the end of Uncle Ling's warehouse, and Leggy went down there. It was only a wooden frame screened all around, and having an overhanging roof to shed the rain, but the privacy was luxurious. Bill had a cot, two chairs, and a folding table. It was pleasant after you had been on edge all day to relax and smoke in the dark; to chin with a friend about going back to God's country, or what not.

Bill was pretty well informed about the situation in camp produced by the coming of La Rosadora. But even to Bill, Leggy could not bring himself to speak of the terrific stake he had in the matter. Not yet, anyhow. The subject was too painful. Maybe Bill guessed part of it. Tonight Leggy merely said with a short laugh, "I've got a new assignment."

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"My boss has given me the job of putting Manoel's light out."

"The hell you say!" remarked Bill pleasantly.

"It's either Manoel or me."

"Are you going to do it?"

"No."

"What do you stick around here for, anyhow?" asked Bill. "There's nothing here for you."

"I have reasons," said Leggy reticently.

They smoked a while in silence, then Leggy said:

"Thought maybe you and me could stage a fake assassination of Manoel. Just to keep Blacktower quiet for a while."

Bill laughed. "Pretty good! Got a plan doped out?"

"Not yet. I have six days. It's got to be something convincing."

"Sure! Let's make it spectacular! Count on me, fellow!"

"Thanks," said Leggy.

On his way home with the ice Leggy paused to look through the shutters of the gambling hall, and saw Blacktower in his usual elevated seat behind the cash desk, overlooking the scene with his hard grin. Hours later, lying awake in his hammock, he heard the boss come stumbling over the bridge, cursing under his breath. Blacktower almost never drank. A moment later the double ring, Leggy's signal, rang through the house. Finding Blacktower lying panting on his bed, he made him as comfortable as he could.

During the following days Blacktower would allow nobody to enter his room but Leggy.

Leggy said to him: "I've got to get out and around some, if I want to pick up any information."

"Let the others do the housework," growled Blacktower.

"I need money for expenses."

"What the hell expenses have you?"

"I want to keep on feeding change to the servant at the hotel, so I can find out what goes on there. And if I'm going to hang around camp, I've got to buy a drink occasionally."

"There's money in the drawer. Take two dollars. One for the girl. And hear me! If you get drunk I won't wait for the week to be out."

Leggy grinned inwardly at this threat. He knew his own value now. "A man can't buy a load for a dollar in this town," he said.

Blacktower showed his teeth at this bit of lip, but he said nothing.

Thus Leggy won the right to go and come pretty much as he chose. Naturally it made Chou and the Hawaiian boy sore. They looked on Leggy as a traitor to their common cause against the boss. But that was a mere flea-bite. They'll have to lump it, he thought.

As he went around the camp it was not Manoel that concerned him. Manoel could wait a day or two; but how to get in touch with Fay. It was hard to think of Fay at all, and keep cool. The ladder was presumably still lying under the veranda of the hotel where he had hidden it, but he could not approach her via the veranda without cutting the screen, and that would give everything away.

The ladder must be saved for the final getaway.

THERE remained Ria. Ria probably tidied Fay's room. Even if she were not permitted to see Fay, she could slip a letter under her door. It would be even more difficult for Fay to answer it. Anyhow, trust the two women to find a way. Judging from the treatment that Ria received from Pepita, there was little danger

of the girl betraying him to her mistress. But what was the use of writing to Fay unless he had something definite to propose? There Leggy was stuck.

The sight of Bill Keene putting in a new pane of glass in Uncle Ling's store gave him an idea. He paused idly in the store to watch the operation. The old Chinaman was figuring at his table a few yards behind him.

"Listen," said Leggy to Bill under his breath. "Could you spare me a handful of putty well worked up?"

Bill, seemingly intent on his work, nodded imperceptibly.

Leggy said, "Take it home when you go, and I'll get it there," and went back into the store to make his purchases.

Again that night Blacktower departed for the theater all buttoned up and top-hatted, though he was swaying on his feet with fever. As yet no infection had developed in the wound. Leggy remained in his room to tidy it up. All the medicaments had to be put out of sight, and the soiled bandages rolled up and shoved in Leggy's pocket until he got a chance to throw them overboard.

Leggy searched through Blacktower's things until he found a little wooden box that had brought a pair of spectacles through the mail. Blacktower never allowed anybody to catch him using the spectacles. The box was the exact size that Leggy required, and he took it. It would never be missed.

In Bill's shack five minutes later he received the putty. Bill was full of curiosity, but would not ask questions. Leggy volunteered no information. He mumbled in hangdog fashion:

"Mind if I write a letter here?"

"Go ahead," said Bill.

"If I wrote it at Blacktower's desk

the servants would tell on me. And I've got no place of my own to go. That flat-faced Hawaiian would go nuts if he saw anybody writing a letter and couldn't find out what was in it."

They rigged out an acetylene lamp in such a fashion that it illuminated the table without showing up the occupants of the shack. Thus if anybody passed by, it might be supposed that it was Bill sitting there writing. Leggy had brought his own paper and envelope. He started without any idea of what he was going to say; but as soon as he had written "Fay" it came pouring out.

His pencil raced back and forth across the paper as if driven by a power outside himself. All the thoughts and feelings locked up inside him, surprising him a little when he saw them written down.

In the middle of it he checked himself. How was Fay going to take all this? With a crooked smile maybe and saying, "If you love me as much as that, why didn't you stand by me in the beginning?"

Leggy's head sank down between his shoulders. You have no rights over her now, he told himself; better stick to plain facts. He slowly tore his letter into small bits and shoved them in his pocket. He started again:

Dear Fay,

You know I'm here because you saw me. I know you're in a nasty jam, Fay, and I'm studying how to get you out of it. Not that I think I mean anything to you now, because I know I don't, but just what any man would do. I am giving Ria a little box with this that has clay in the bottom. If you or she can get hold of the key to your door for a minute, and

make an impression of it in the clay, I'll have another key made, so you can let yourself out at night. I noticed there was a communicating door between the hotel and the back of the theater. After I get the key in your hands I'll be waiting in the theater every morning between four-thirty and five-thirty, hoping you may be able to join me there. We can talk over what's to be done. Don't come after five-thirty, because it gets light.

Yours sincerely,

Matt.

When he read it over he hated the bald words. In thought he added to his letter: Oh, God! if you knew how I loved you! But he would not write it.

AT noon next day Leggy, dressing Blacktower's wound, said: "Could you get up some excuse to send me to the hotel, boss? Unless I got a reason for going they'll get suspicious."

"Sure," said Blacktower, grinning through his pain. "Make up a package for La Rosadora of some of the fancy food I got in on the steamboat, and I'll send a letter with it."

Thus, half an hour later Leggy was pounding and kicking at the gate of the hotel. In due course Ria opened it. Her stolid brown face never changed a muscle at the sight of Leggy, nevertheless there was a kind of unspoken exchange. She let him understand she was his friend. For the benefit of any possible watcher from the windows, he slapped her cheek playfully and gave her a shove. Ria bridled, and shoved back. The caboclos were natural born deceivers.

He gave her first Blacktower's pack-

age and letter. "For La Rosadora," he said. "Let Pepita see it." Ria nodded. Then his own little box and letter. "For La Rosadora. *Don't* let Pepita see it." Box and letter were whisked inside the bosom of her dress. Finally they shook hands and Ria palmed the silver dollar expertly.

"How can I get an answer from you?" asked Leggy.

"Morning I go on Kai Ling store," said Ria.

He went home, already in a fever at the prospect of getting an answer. He presented a smooth face to the boss. Blacktower's eyes were fever-bright, too, for a different reason.

"Well, what did you find out?" he snarled.

Leggy lied glibly. "Manoel goes to play jack-pot afternoons in the room back of Figueroa's rum shop, but I don't see how I can get him by daylight without showing myself. The same when he's around the theater. But Ria says he's a bad sleeper, and sometimes he walks out at night. I'll be laying for him."

Leggy's stolid air enraged Blacktower.

"I want action on this!" he snarled, cursing. "*Make* a chance to get the man or I'll find somebody who can!"

"Doing my best," said Leggy.

Next morning he was hanging around On Kai Ling's store as soon as it opened. Anybody who knew Blacktower might have been surprised to see one of his servants with nothing to do for hour after hour. That had to be chanced.

Ria came along about ten o'clock. She passed Leggy without a sign of recognition. Nothing in her hands but an empty basket. The shock of disappointment was like falling through space. But after she had gone into the

store there was his little box lying on the ground. Pouncing on it, and slipping back the cover, he saw the impression of a key in the clay—but no letter!

Tell himself as much as he liked that Fay no longer had any use for him, it was a stab just the same. Though it was risky, he hung around until Ria came out of the store.

"No letter?" he murmured.

"She got no paper for write," said Ria without looking at him.

Well, anyhow, he had the impression of the key. Fay meant to meet him in the empty theater. Leggy was too excited to wait until night before seeing Bill. He hailed him on sight and slipped him the box.

"Look, Bill, could you make me a key from that impression?" he asked.

Bill could not contain his curiosity. "For God's sake, what you up to, fellow?"

"Nothing crooked."

"Did I say I thought it was crooked?"

"No. But I...I can't explain. You are the only friend I've got. It's not because I don't trust you. I'm in your hands anyhow. But I can't talk about it, Bill."

"That's all right, fellow. I'll have it for you tonight."

On the following morning Leggy watched when Ria went in, and moved up to the ice plant, lounging against the corrugated iron front.

In his pants pocket Leggy was fingering the little wooden box which now had a key in it. He had ripped the seam of the pocket.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Queer Plants and Animals

AUSTRALIA is a land of strange things as well as big ones, some of which are like nothing else found in any other part of the earth. There are lilies that reach the height of a three-story house, trees that grow grass, and other trees whose trunks are shaped like huge bottles. In the dense Australian wilds are mighty eucalyptus trees rising two hundred feet in the air. They shed their bark instead of their foliage, and the leaves are attached to the stems obliquely instead of horizontally. There are towering tree ferns such as disappeared from the rest of the earth thousands of years ago, and are now seen elsewhere only in the fossilized remains of prehistoric times.

Two-thirds of the animals of Australia, like its famous kangaroo, are marsupials; that is, the females have pouches in which they carry their young. Except for the opossum and the opossum rat of Patagonia, marsupials occur nowhere else. Stranger than the kangaroo, stranger even than Australia's wingless bird, the emu, is the platypus, which is found only on this island continent. It has a bill like a duck's, fur like a seal's, and a pouch like that of a kangaroo. It is equally at home on land as in the water. It lays eggs, yet it is a mammal; though a mammal, it has no teats, but nourishes its young by means of milk that exudes through pores into its pouch.

—Carl C. Mellor.

Aggie B., Which Ran the Wrong Way

By C. C. RICE

*She was spavined and spare
—yet Aggie B. made over
\$170,000 in one race—without
even running in the
right direction*



Goin' Places was swallowing ground like a crazy horse

THE Colonel was the worst liar I've ever known, without a doubt. If he'd jumped in the lake I wouldn't have believed his splash. Nevertheless, the wildest story he ever told me I did believe, and for the simple reason that it was beyond human ingenuity to snatch such a story out of thin air.

We were sitting on the veranda of his luxurious farm-house, he and I, sipping the frosted juleps he so dearly loved to serve. I guess he figured they might lend an air of authenticity to his title of Colonel. As

a matter of fact, a child could have told that he was strictly phony — typically Brooklyn, the Colonel.

He'd just finished telling me a beauty about a two-year-old colt he'd once seen, which ran so fast it got all four legs tangled up in a knot, broke 'em, and had to be destroyed on the spot.

"You don't believe that, do you?" he asked sadly.

"Certainly not. Neither do you."

"N-o-o," he sighed. "Too bad there's so few true stories worth telling. Truth

ain't half so strange as fiction, and nobody can tell me different."

He gulped his julep contemplatively.

"See that mare out there?" he asked, pointing out to the pasture. "That's Aggie B., and she's twenty-three years old. Maybe you've wondered about her before?"

I had. She looked fully a hundred and twenty-three. She was the laziest, mangiest, fattest mare I'd ever seen. And she had an annoyingly impertinent stare in her eye.

"Well," the Colonel went on, "I don't expect you to believe this. I don't expect you to believe that that mare once made over \$170,000 for me in one race—without even running the right way."

I raised my eyebrows as high as they would go. This was the worst yet.

"No fooling," he insisted. "I can prove it. It happened not five miles away from here—right down at the track—just twenty years ago. . . ."

Then he launched into this yarn:

I'D just turned forty. What little sense I had told me that it was about time for me to think of settling down to some sort of security. Hanging around the tracks ain't such fun for a man who's beginning to get on speaking terms with Pa Time. Anybody knows that. And so one day after I landed down here—and after I'd had a particularly tough session at the park—I decided to get myself a job. I did; right over at the Stimson-Frink barrel outfit. You can even find my name on the payroll—if they keep records that old.

Well, I worked steady for two weeks, and the second Saturday night I went to dinner with twenty bucks in my pocket—fifteen in my pay envelope and five I'd saved from the week before. I felt pretty set up about earning all that honest money, and it looked as though Security was galloping toward me five furlongs a minute. You see, I'd always had an itch to keep hens and cows; to make a really serious business of it. I figured if I kept saving like I was doing, I'd be collecting eggs and milk in no time.

When I strolled down Main Street that Saturday night, thumbs in my vest, I ran

across some of the boys from the track. They wanted to know where in time I'd been. I told them where, and how I was well on my way to being a country squire. They laughed themselves sick.

"Barrels!" somebody snorted. "Whoever heard of making dough on barrels! Why, I've got a 'sleeper' for Monday that'll net me enough to buy that whole damn barrel factory!"

Then they all began telling me the hot ones for Monday, and how they were going to play them.

"Go ahead," I said. "Throw away your dough if you want to. Mine is sure and safe, and I'm playing eggs and milk on the nose."

They howled again, and somebody began to yell, "Nickel-nurser!"

Well, youngster, that was twenty years ago, when I still had plenty of racing in me. And you don't know how bad twenty bucks can burn a guy who's got racing in his blood. Particularly when a crowd gets to kidding him.

"Listen, you paper doll cutters!" I sneered. "I'll show you a trick! I'll put every cent I got on a six-horse-parley! Twenty bucks! What's more, I'll pick 'em blind!"

That stopped 'em some little, you can bet. They stared at me open-mouthed.

"Whoever heard of a six-horse-parlay!"

"You guys never did!" I told them. "But I'll show you how it's done. Just hold up a paper with Monday's entries in it, back toward me."

Somebody fished out a paper and held it like I said. I took my tie-pin and punched six holes right down the column. Then I looked at the other side. I'd stabbed two or three good ones; the rest not so good. I copied down the names and made for Dubrion Binns's office, the gang at my heels.

"Take a six-horse-parlay, Duby?" I asked him.

"Six-horse-parlay!" He stared up from his desk, looking as surprised as a book-maker can look. "Well, why not? What should I lose, hooking a sucker?"

He grinned, and so did the crowd, ear to ear.

SUNDAY I spent feeling sort of hungry. But the satisfaction made up for it. I guess it was the same sort of satisfaction Steve Brody got out of his Brooklyn Bridge jump. Monday happened to be Labor Day, and so no work at the barrel factory.

I went out to the park and managed to get in all right. Of course I wasn't expecting to see my parlay come through. I'd never heard of any one betting a six-horse-parlay before, let alone winning one. I doubt whether the Lord himself could actually win one.

But maybe you don't know exactly how a parlay works? Well, it's where your bookie bets back your winnings for you. Pyramiding. If you win on the first horse in your parlay, he bets back your original bet and profits on the next horse—and so on. So you can see that with luck you win a pile of dough with very little outlay. The catch is, *all* the horses in the parlay have to win. The minute one loses, your bookie takes the whole business. Two- and three-horse parlays are tough enough. A six-horse-parlay has the same chance as a hippopotamus in the Kentucky Derby. Especially when you pick 'em blind!

In fact, by the time they were going to the post in the first race, I was beginning to regret throwing away that twenty bucks.

The horse I'd stabbed was the even money favorite, Message to Garcia. It was all decided as soon as he broke. He ran first at every post, and won by five lengths; which wasn't a surprise to me or anyone else. It just made me wish I'd bet on him alone.

Well, at least I could have the fun of making believe I was going to win my parlay, so I wrote down the figures in my little black book. So far at even money, Dubrion Binns owed me forty bucks—"So far" was right!

The next race made me smile sarcastically. My stab horse was Teacher's Pet, at three-to-one—and not a bad skate at all.

He proved it by just nosing through on top.

"Gee," I thought, "if I'd only made that a two-horse parlay, the egg-and-milk plant would be pretty near!"—And it would have been, for the figures in my book now showed that one hundred and sixty bucks was due me.

But it was the next race that really got my goat. I was on a filly named Bo-Bo, which closed at four-to-one. I gave her an outside chance, and nothing better. But when the dogs began galloping around, Bo-Bo was plenty in there, proving that she had very much of an inside chance. In fact, she won by two lengths!

I shook my head to see if all the wheels were going around the right way. Sure enough, they posted her number on the board. My pencil just wouldn't behave as I figured up the gravy—One-sixty at four-to-one, including the amount bet, totalled exactly eight hundred marbles! I could actually feel the eggs and milk in my hands! I was just about ready to cry. No fooling!

I THOUGHT I'd better drown my misery at the bar, so I scuffed over there and chiselled four fingers of bourbon off Oscar, who was always crazy enough to trust me.

The bourbon made me feel a little better, and I told Oscar about my six-horse-parlay, and how three had already come in. He agreed that it was terrible tough luck, but he couldn't help laughing. He got me to laughing too, probably due to a second four fingers of bourbon which he'd poured out for me. We got so interested telling each other about different crazy bets we'd made in our lives that I forgot all about the fourth race until the roar from the stands.

I walked out front to watch the finish. My horse was Ishkabibble, a twelve-to-one shot, which might have had a fighting chance if all the other entries had been sail boats. So I couldn't work up any fever heat of enthusiasm.

But as those alligators tore around into the stretch, who should be up in front but

A 5—I

old Ishkabibble! And he kept in front too, as if the Devil himself was after him with a red-hot poker. I don't know whether it was the shock or the bourbon; anyway, my head whirled right around on my neck ten times, and I fell back upon the customer behind me! When I was able to walk again, I made for the bar dizzily.

"Oscar!" I choked. "The fourth just came in!"

Oscar's eyes popped, and in a jiffy he had another four fingers poured. I tell you I needed it! Together, we figured out the profits. Ten thousand four hundred dollars! We checked that and we double-checked it, but it was positively the goods!

"Oh Gawd!" I groaned. "I could buy every hen and cow in the state!"

"Sure you could—if you only had a four-horse-parlay!"

"Oscar, what can I do to stop this?" I pleaded. "There must be *some* way!"

Oscar shook his head mournfully. "You might shoot the next two entries—" he offered, doubtfully.

That suggestion didn't help much.

I went out to watch the fifth, for exactly the same reason people go to look at a horrible train wreck—the morbid urge and nothing else. My horse was a spavined gelding called Goin' Places. Wherever he was going, it didn't seem likely he was going under the wire. Not at sixteen-to-one; and not unless the others fell apart at the half-post.

The start of the race I saw dimly, through blurred eyes. It took years for the nags to get around the track. When they finally pounded into the stretch, they were all in a bunch. And suddenly one drew out—Goin' Places!

I gave an eerie wail that must have sounded like a banshee which didn't know whether to be glad or miserable.—And on came Goin' Places, swallowing up the ground like a crazy horse! Nobody could touch him!

Up went his number on the board. The whole park began whizzing around my ears, and I could feel the icy perspiration rush out all over me.

A 6—1

"FOR Gawd's sake!" I heard a voice exclaim. "You look like you'd been buried three days! You'd better get home to bed?"

It was old Plater Paul, the tout. I focussed his three faces down to one, and then I groaned in the voice of a man being broken on the rack. "What do you think of Aggie B., in the next?"

"Aggie B.!" he exploded, doubling up with laughter. "Aggie B.! What do I *think* of her?—What do I think of that three-legged, sway-backed porcupine? Why, I'll give you five-to-one that she won't even run the right way!"

Plater Paul walked away still shaking with mirth. It was perhaps the most mournful moment of my whole life. Here I had only one more horse to go, one more step to making a fortune, and my horse had to be Aggie B.! Her odds were already a hundred and sixty-to-one, and climbing every minute. My book said I was \$176,800 to the good. —And of course that was \$176,800 gone to the dogs, just like that!

I gritted my teeth. There *must* be some way to save that \$176,800! Wildly I considered several possibilities, such as setting fire to the stands, dynamiting the track, or shooting all the judges. If I could stop all this crazy business I wouldn't have to lose! Suddenly I came to my senses and hit on the one reasonable idea. If I could scratch Aggie B. I'd save that dough. I snatched up a program and ran my finger down the list of owners. Aggie B. belonged to a guy named Adolf Himmelmann. I started on the run for the stables. Faster and faster I ran, until I could hardly keep my feet under me, and I lasted just long enough to reach Himmelmann's stalls.

Aggie B. was already being saddled for a quick breeze before the race. She was the most forlorn looking mess you ever saw.

"You Himmelmann?" I croaked to a guy who stood by.

"Yeah. Whadda you want?"

He was a downright ornery party, I could tell right off.

"How much will you take for the mare?"

He stared at me as if I was insane.

"Gowann!" he grunted. "What's the idea?"

"Give you anything you want!"

"Show me some dough."

"I'll write you a check. You can cash it in the morning."

"Yeah, I thought so.—On your way, bum!"

"Listen," I pleaded, grabbing his lapels, "I'll claim her—What's her claiming price?"

"Fifteen hundred—and you ain't got it. Besides, you couldn't claim her until after the race anyhow." He turned away.

"But for heaven's sake, wait! Don't let that horse race! If she steps foot on that track I'm a ruined man!"

"Bah!" he snorted. "I couldn't scratch her this late, even if I wanted to. There ain't nothing wrong with her—except she can't run."

Suddenly my mind functioned. When a mind absolutely *has* to function, it generally does. Plater Paul's remark shot through my brain—"Five-to-one she won't even run the right way!"

"Listen," I said hoarsely, "if she ain't even in the park, that's plenty excuse for scratching her!"

He gaped at me. "What the devil are you jabbering about!"

"Watch, I'll show you!"

I turned to Aggie B., who was all saddled now, and raring not to go.

"Aggie," I told her under my breath, "we're going places!"

One colossal jump and I landed on her back. Without bothering about stirrups, I gave her a quick jab in the belly with my heels. Aggie B. reared, snorted, and started off like a bee had stung her. We charged out toward the main gate, hell-bent, Himmelmann cursing his lungs out behind.

IT was a tough gallop for me, particularly when she got to clattering along the paved road. But I hung on with my knees—\$176,800 worth—and tried to catch the stirrups, which were whacking like mad at my shins.

I guess she must have put nearly five miles behind us before she began to tire.

I felt sorry for the mare, and I thought maybe we could turn off the road somewhere. I looked to the side, and what should I see but a big pasture full of beautiful fat cows, and a dozen long hen-houses in the background!

"Whoa, Aggie!" I yelled, and turned her up into the big barn.

I got down, feeling pretty sore and disappointed. A farmerish party ran out from the house to see what the commotion was.

"What'll you take for the farm?" I asked him. He looked startled and mystified. I asked him again.

"We-ell," he said, dazedly, "there's lots of fine stock—and five buildings—and three hundred acres, all mortgage-free. But I dunno's I wouldn't take thirty thousand."

"Done!" I said. "What's your bank?"

"Second National."

"Fine. Just where I do. Give me a Second National check and I'll write it for thirty thousand. You can cash it in the morning."

He took me into the house, and I made it out for him. Then I wrote another, payable to Adolf Himmelmann, for fifteen hundred, which was Aggie B.'s claiming price. I gave it to a farm hand and told him to drive to the track as fast as he could, so he could hand it to the stewards in time. I didn't want any one to say I hadn't come by Aggie B. honestly. . . .

THE Colonel paused for a moment, and hollered for two more juleps.

"S-o-o," he concluded, "the hens are still laying—though not the same hens. The cows are still giving milk—likewise, not the same cows. But Aggie B. is still here in person, all \$176,800 worth of her."

I looked out there and saw Aggie B. staring at us scornfully.

"Look at her—the tyrant!" chuckled the Colonel. "Some day I'd like to take her down a few pegs. I'd like to remind her that if she'd run the right way that day, she'd be nothing but glue by now."

THE END



The gun pointed at
Schnitzler

War Declared!

By THEODORE ROSCOE

*The greatest surprise any
army ever received awaited
the conquering Teuton
horde that swept into Hel-
vania in 1936*

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ALTHOUGH America was not involved in the European conflict of 1936, John Keats, an American, played an important part in the stirring and mysterious events that precipitated the catastrophe.

As correspondent for Universe News, Keats was one of the star reporters assigned to cover the conference in the Teuton capital between Baron Von Speer, Premier of Teutony, and Victor Gatreau, Foreign Minister of Esperance. That conference, in a hotel room, was never finished. When attendants entered the room they found both men shot dead, apparently after a duel.

The Teuton police claimed that the Esperenchman had started the duel. Without warning, Teutony struck at Esperance, destroying the Esperench capital with aerial bombs. A reprisal raid

by Esperench planes destroyed the Teuton capital. However, the Teutons were too well armed, and after but a few hours of disastrous fighting, Esperance surrendered. Teutony then declared war on Helvania, the little Alpine mountain kingdom near Switzerland.

John Keats, meantime, had been working on the theory that Von Speer and Gatreau had not killed each other, but that they had both been murdered by someone who wanted war. Across Esperance he and Crazy Hooper, his camera man, raced on the track of other correspondents who had been assigned to cover that fateful meeting—one of whom Keats believed guilty of the murders. They were Alexandra Frantsova, the Russian girl; Anton Stehli, the Swiss; Paul Emmerich, now a major in the Teuton army; Raoul Dubail,

This story began in the Argosy for April 27

the Esperenchman masquerading in a Teuton uniform.

CHAPTER XI.

INVASION!

"**H**ELVANIA," says your Atlas Almanac of 1936, "is that little kingdom of Balkan extraction, bordered on the east by Rumania, its western frontier recently extended—by Treaty of 1935—through former Austrian territory to Godek Pass in the Franco-Swiss Alps. A benevolent monarchy, the crown passed at the death of King Gillam III to the present ruler, Queen Roberta.

"The palace of the Queen is in Helva; the state forum and the council chambers open to all who care to witness government sessions from the visitors' galleries. A broad new boulevard cuts through the heart of the city, boasted by its engineers as the widest avenue in the world. At the cost of many millions this avenue, which runs from west to east gate, is lined with great elms and cool parks, the scene of many carnivals and fiestas, and a traveler on this luxurious thoroughfare, remembering he is in one of the smallest countries in Europe, may well be amazed—"

JOHAN KEATS, traveling on that luxurious thoroughfare, was more than amazed. The Minerva, dented, dusty and roaring, looked no more like a magic carpet than Crazy Hooper, at the wheel, resembled Aladdin. But here they were at Rainbow's End. Somewhere this racing limousine had outrun reality. At one o'clock of the afternoon this couldn't be a city awaiting the crash of an invading horde. Where had they left reality behind? At that place on the mountain road when Crazy had first spied the coming army and an old man had passed them with a basket of flowers and a card that said "Welcome"?

Keats glared through the windshield glassy-eyed. Five years ago he'd been in this Helvanian capital, but there'd been no boulevard like this. Had Crazy Hooper

steered off the map into another country?

There was the same leisured passing of ox teams and creaky vans, shiny motors and busy bicycles. Screened sidewalk cafés, little islands in the flow of pedestrians where one might stop for coffee and an unhurried glass. Book stalls and courteous flower girls, people and dogs strolling in the public gardens, shoe-shine boys and newsboys and peddlers hawking along the curb. The city was cool, summery.

"Crazy, am I out of my head?"

"It's got me, buddy. I was wonderin' if an empty stomach had turned me nuts."

The car began to pass a file of statues, heroic figures in marble that watched their speed with no more excitement than the pavement crowds. Five years ago these men in marble had been captains and kings. Keats stared at the sculptured figures in deepening astonishment. The captains and the kings had departed. Like the boulevard's concrete, these statues were new. There was Shakespeare, colossal with Elizabethan ruff and pen. Then Pasteur, the healer. Plato and Aristotle from ancient Greece. Roöntgen, discoverer of the X-ray. Lincoln. Cervantes.

What wizardry had put these people on the pedestals of kings? No Napoleons, no conquerors remembered on this boulevard. Here were artists, musicians, healers, philosophers, singers and players of a hundred nationalities, discoverers of medicine, men who had found time to tell tales to children. What kind of a nation's capital was this?

"I'm dreaming," Keats panted, "dreaming."

THEY fled across a square where a new marble was rising in block and tackle. Five years ago an equestrian of King Leopold had stood above those flower beds. Now the Helvanian ruler was gone; his place given over to a pyramid wearing another name. Argo Galenne, the young Helvanian poet.

The Minerva was slowing down. Keats pulled himself together with an effort. No time to stop in front of miracles.

"Step on it, Crazy! She can't be far. Frantsovna—"

"Gas," the lank one snapped. "Got to stop for petrol."

They slid into a filling station. Crazy sped from the car toward a restaurant stand while the pumps were working, and Keats, collapsed in the seat, could only continue to stare at the façade of the cathedral across the boulevard. Five years ago that edifice had housed the Helvanian State Church and its one-eyed bishop, as formal in its religion as its stony architecture. But the portal had been altered to a broad staircase open to the sun. A row of marble figures stood at the top step flanking the door. Above the door was a shining invitation in bronze: "Worship For All." The statues congregated there were the fathers of world religions, Confucius and Moses and Lao Tse, Zoroaster and Buddha, Christ and Mohammed, their shoulders touching in amity, their faces turned to the avenue in friendly appeal. On the walkways below, the passers-by wore expressions of cheer. Near-by buildings were in holiday garb. Flags and flowers, drapes and festoons and colored toy balloons. The city was red and green with bunting, the colors of Helvania. Peasants and carts everywhere. Children in frills. Kids eating peanuts. Furniture vans creaking by. Everybody seemed to be moving in from the country. Was this a national holiday, a national moving day? Cloth banners fluttered above the avenue. Signs and flags. "Welcome." "Greetings." "Helvania Invites All Comers." "Welcome."

KEATS whistled at a newsboy, and the lad came on the skip.

"Read all about it—traffic bill passed—"

Traffic bill! The newspaper, Helvania's largest courier, cracked and quivered in Keats' hand. No news at all! Headlines about a bill going through the Helvanian Crown Council. Front page story featuring a council debate on the speed of motor cars. Council had passed a bill that

all automobiles must be controlled by an attachment that would cut motoring speed to fifty miles an hour. A precautionary measure to slow up joy-riders on the nation's new highways and prevent traffic accidents.

Headlining a bill to prevent traffic accidents, and not a soldier in those outlying fields to stop that avalanche! Well, it might be expected of a country that trusted its pedestals to philosophers and poets and invited the fathers of religion to stand together at the door of its cathedral. Unbelieving, Keats gaped at the newspaper in his fingers. Queen Roberta couldn't be responsible for this monstrous censorship of important news. Some ugly dictatorship over the press was hiding truth from the public in this country.

His hands shook through the printed pages; stiffened in new astoundment. Here it was! The latest press dispatches, on the next to last page, among the underwear advertisements. Reported in small type as of no more import than the story of a dog biting a man. *Teutons War On Esperance. March Through Swiss End of Godek Pass. Esperench Capital Destroyed by Aerial Torpedoes. Their Government Collapses and Armies Mutiny Before Teuton Advance. Capital of Teutony destroyed in reprisal. Gas, disease, fire ravages both great cities. War flames in all modern methods of horror after killing of statesmen in Metropole conference. But Swiss and Esperench are beaten in less than fifty hours' fighting. Thousands of citizens slain, Allied troops decimated before tremendous Teuton war machine— Schnitzler sets in motion greatest motorized army ever known—*

IT was true, then! He wasn't imagining, for here was the latest noon release in the Helvanian papers. Relegated among the underwear ads, but honestly reported in black and white.

John Keats lifted his unbelieving glance from the newspaper to see if the city was still there. It was. He could look down the boulevard and still see the statues of

poets and minnesingers under cool trees. He could look across the plaza at the amazing new cathedral. Bunting fluttered in the sunshine and Welcome signs floated in the breeze. Didn't they read the papers? That brown-skinned peasant in his embroidered waistcoat, conducting a tan and white ox along the curb, hadn't he ever heard of aerial torpedoes? Those two Helvanian mothers in frilly skirts walking arm in arm ahead of their scampering children, didn't they know what had happened in Esperance, in Teutony?

Dimly Keats realized Crazy Hooper was back from under the restaurant awning with two sandwiches in his mouth, a dozen more in his hand, juggling ham and bread as he paid off the filling station attendant.

"Crazy Hooper," Keats whispered, "did we see that army coming?"

The tow-head nodded soberly.

Keats snatched a sandwich. "Stop at that traffic policeman out there. Hurry, man! Hurry!"

THE Minerva slid them across the boulevard, stopped at the officer's post. The red and green policeman eyed them incuriously and continued to wigwag his white gantlets. A procession of small girls carrying a daisy chain passed, laughing, before the halted foreign car. Consternation muddled Keats' tongue. Not a word of Helvanian could he muster. This cop must think he was strangling on a sandwich. Then the language came at a blurt.

"Officer—I—I want to go to the capital of Helvania!"

"But," with a smile at the flag on the Minerva's radiator cap, "you *are* in Helvania's capital, my American."

"This is the main avenue through the city?"

"The main highway going to points east, my American."

"A blue touring car," Keats gurgled. "Did such a car come this way? Driven by a woman in a khaki waterproof—"

"I noticed her because she was a foreigner," smiled the traffic man, "and driv-

ing very fast. But we do not arrest those unfamiliar with our local ordinances."

Then Frantsovna had gone through! And the rest of it was coming. Border communications must have been cut by the motorcycle Uhlans, and this city wasn't warned, didn't know it stood in a tornado's path! But the language wasn't made whereby you could tell a policeman that an enemy army was thunderbolting down his road and he'd better prepare to die. Not when the fellow stood smiling and adjusting his buttons and directing daisy chains.

"Crazy," Keats switched hoarse yelling into English, "they don't know there's a war. My God! Palace of the Queen, and make it fast!"

The Minerva started like a bullet. Streets, squares, parks, monuments blurred rearward in a rainbow streak. Crazy made it fast. A dozen blocks at hair-raising steeplechase pace, and the long car smoked up a gravel drive, through a tall open gateway to the marble columns of a ferro-concrete palace hatted by a gleaming white dome that stood like an Alpine snowcap against the sun. A vague glimpse of frock-coated functionaries strolling in the palace gardens. Uniformed dignitaries lounging along the terrace, discussing in little groups on the palace steps.

Every window, gallery, cornice of the palace was gala with flags. A tremendous banner, red letters on green gauze, floated above the marble portal. "Welcome To Helvania." Not a soldier in evidence save the ornamental Household Guards too lazy to challenge a foreign car.

BURSTING with bewilderment and panic, John Keats dashed up the marble steps into the coolness of a broad, open hall where his running boots made the racket of a colt on the floor of a museum. Nobody stopped him. Courtiers who stood at inner doors eyed him with composure. He must look like a maniac, unkempt from hours on the open road, features black with dirt and sleeplessness, darting into a palace with a half-eaten

sandwich forgotten in his hand; but the grizzled chamberlain in velvet who came forward to learn his business might have been expecting him.

Keats choked, swayed on his feet. "The Queen—Queen Roberta!"

"You have an appointment? Your name, please."

"John Keats—war correspondent Universe News! She—the Queen will know. I—I must see Her Majesty—"

Apparently Her Majesty did know. "Her Royal Highness has been awaiting your arrival," was the astounding response. "This way, please."

Dumb, Keats followed the velvet chamberlain up a sweep of staircase to bronze doors that opened into a wide bright drawing-room where a white figure—another marble?—stood alone at room's end. The chamberlain was retiring, bowing at the hips, and that solitary figure was not a marble. Posed at a sun-filled casement, the girlish profile was unaware, eyes turned toward the window in thoughtful contemplation of the boulevard below.

She was wearing the same white riding costume as when he'd seen her last before her coronation; linen blouse open at the throat, spotless whipcord breeches, milky leather boots silver-spurred. Sunny hair bound with a cord of gold across her untroubled forehead. Seeing here there, Keats rooted to the carpet on feet of stone. They'd deserted her already! Abandoned their Queen! He clawed the hat from his head and miserably twisted the article in nerveless fingers. Hearing, she turned with a smile, and then, as if receiving seedy Americans was a habit of hers every afternoon, she extended both hands in informal greeting.

"John Keats, I am so glad. I knew you would come."

"Sire," he gasped. "Your Majesty—"

"You see I am not surprised." She spoke as if they'd left off visiting yesterday and the years between were not at all. "I had instructed my border outposts to watch for you, and they wirelessly me this morning when you crossed the border from

Switzerland. I suspected your papers would send you to my country. Such a long time since you were with us. And just in time to report our greatest holiday—"

"Your Majesty," the tongue moved like a rusty bell-clapper behind his teeth, "I—I'm not here to cover any assignment. Europe—you must know Europe is at war! Esperance and Switzerland have fallen. I tell you, I—I've just come from Godek Pass—there was a disastrous battle—the Teuton armies—"

THE Queen continued to smile. "I was anxious to hear an account, and would have sent for you. Helvania needs an honest observer—"

The palace drawing-room spun in whorls of color at Keats' eyes. He cried, "You do not understand me, Sire. Teutony has crushed the Allies. Esperance is beaten. Your generals have deceived you, betrayed you, sold your country out—"

"No," she contradicted cheerfully, "my generals have not tricked me. I am in sole command of Helvania's troops. Every citizen will prove a loyal soldier when the time arrives."

"But the time is here!" John Keats could have wept. "I saw them coming over your border not four hours ago. Tanks. Cannon! The Teuton army—"

"We know that," the Queen said gently. "They declared war."

"But your national defenses," Keats yelled. "Your national defenses—"

"You have seen them," said Queen Roberta, smiling, "pictured along the city's boulevard. Tolerance, religion, friendship, education, justice. Those are Helvania's defenses. And laughter," she added as an afterthought. "Laughter. The holiday, the flags, it is for the Teutons. I radioed Herr Schnitzler to come ahead, and my subjects look forward to a wonderful parade. Let us join the welcoming committee on this outside balcony where we may see it better."

She had radioed her country's enemies to come ahead!

A low muttering tremor on the window casements grew in the blond day outside like a rising of wind. An undertone, bee-like droning, the chorus of thousands of rolling wheels overtone by a far-away, myriad-throated human outcry.

Sweat sprang in icy globes on John Keats' temples. "The Teutons are in the city. The people are screaming!"

"Not screaming," said the Queen, taking his arm. "Cheering."

IF he lived through ten hundred incarnations, Keats told himself, he would never forget that afternoon's review. Bonaparte's entry to Vienna, Sherman at the sea, Von Moltke's strut across Paris—history was cluttered with the sagas of conquerors parading the cities of the vanquished, but there was nothing to match this parade of Teutonic might through the capital of Helvania.

Wedge into a silent little group of frock-coated Helvanian ministers, a girl Queen at his elbow, axle grease on his cuffs, he stood on the balcony with sunshine on his hair, refusing the evidence of his eyes.

These outriding motorcycle Uhlans must have had a shock when they were met on the border by a cleric in gaiters who bade them Godspeed. He could fancy the look-outs in the turrets of their armored cars mopping their jaws and beginning to swear.

Helmets ready to duck an ambush fusillade that hadn't come. Eyes wary for enemy patrols that weren't there. No logs felled across the highway, no cunning barbed-wire traps in the fields, no secret gun pits or exploding mines or bridges smashed for their engineers to repair. Nothing to shoot at save a peasant girl who leaned on a white-nosed Holstein cow and gave them a handwave. Nothing but open road and mountain butterflies and an occasional small Helvanian boy who whooped and grinned. Signal cars deployed across this enemy landscape reporting: "all roads clear, full speed ahead"; officers glaring in incredulity; the High Command throwing down their charts and battle plans with nothing to do but sit.

Keats could imagine the veterans from Belgium and Alsace starting to look over their shoulders and fidget. Certainly the face of the first motor Uhlan who drove through the wide-open city gates saw clear boulevard ahead and eager Helvanians cheering along the curbs, and was struck by nothing more deadly than a handful of confetti—that first Uhlan's face was no whit more astonished than the face of John Keats who saw him come.

THEN, in a blizzard of colored streamers, a snowstorm of ticker tape from roofs and windows, the Teutons marched in. Flashing and glittering, the columns of machinery thundered down the boulevard, wheeled in mechanical precision at the palace gates.

As if at a prearranged signal, every window, gallery and roof the length of that avenue had loosed a rain of flowers and flakes, and the huge iron flocks of war machinery made the appearance of steam-rollers puffing through a florist conservatory. Man and boy, every Helvanian on the line of march had a rose, a carnation, a greeting card, a confetti bag to throw. By the time the infantry lorries were passing, the air was a blowing drift of petals, colored balloons, streamers and tinsel.

Under another blow of astonishment, John Keats saw that Helvanian women, stationed at intervals along the pavement, were passing wicker baskets up to grabbing hands. Showers of cigarettes joined the paper snow from above. Girls in tea gowns, in smart picture hats, in afternoon frocks leaned from rooftops, ledges, doorways, laughing and beckoning, waving, throwing kisses. Somewhere—it must have come from a near-by park, the music intensified by a battery of loud speakers—an orchestra started the "Blue Danube." Music drifted in rhythmic glissades above the crowd-roar, the clank and tonk of iron wheels, the *clop-clop-clop* of caterpillar tractors, the grinding of motors.

Flowers, ticker tape and cheering swirled across the torrent of the guns. Yellow daisies clung to the muzzles of giant Essen

cannon. Wreaths and streamers fluttered from the throats of upturned anti-aircraft rifles, growling howitzers. Never had such an exhibit of death-dealing mechanism trundled before the eyes of a civil populace, and never was there such a reception.

The "Blue Danube"! Something seemed to have gone askew with this military Juggernaut. Its streamlined Teutonic perfection had slipped a gear. Beyond the helpless palace its advance patrols were having an argument, an armored car was out of line down the square, and a company of Helvanian schoolgirls were thronging against the wheel-guards, passing up lunch boxes and gifts. Work Troopers in lorries behind were jostling one another to catch cigarettes out of the sunlight, and a lissom woman in a scarlet gown blew kisses at the grinning men. Transfixed on the palace balcony, Keats watched a liver-faced staff officer dash down the line of stalled trucks, stand up in the motorcycle sidecar, bellow at the troopers. But the woman in the scarlet gown swung from the curb to catch the officer's arm, and was laughing up at him.

"You begin to see?" a small voice whispered at Keats' shoulder. "You begin to understand?"

His fingers clutched the balcony rail. "See? Understand?"

"You see," the Queen whispered, "that is one of *my* generals. Tikita is her name, and they know her, for she has danced in all the great theaters of Europe. Every actress, chorus girl, peasant beauty, every girl and woman of Helvania is somewhere along the boulevard."

"Bravo!" Keats heard the roar. "*Gesundheit*, Tikita! Bravo!"

"We have planned for three years," the Queen went on cheerfully. "My people knew," she gestured at the steel columns blocking the avenue below, "it would come. My ministers saw the straws in the wind. We could never stop Schnitzler; afford no armament race with them. But our budget has prepared for this holiday, a million for flags, a million for flowers and wine."

He wondered if he was hearing this, so he turned his eyes at the speaker's face. Queen Roberta's expression was tranquil, amused. "Is it not cheap compared to an expenditure of billions for armaments? We have no cannon, no air force, no munition plants, and our city is saved. They do not bombard us, for we have nothing of danger for them to destroy."

"But your country—" Keats managed to gasp.

"Schnitzler has preached war. I have preached peace. You will learn my method of fighting is more modern than this dictator's. Instead of gas alarms, fear propaganda, bayonet practice, my people have drilled for holiday, flower brigades, flag exhibits, trained to remain cool under provocation. Rigidly as any Work Troop platoon, my subjects know what to do, how to distribute banners, cards, floral pieces, wine, to preserve order. It takes two to make the quarrel—"

"But if shooting starts—"

HER lips made a firm line. "The Teutons alone can start it. My police have long ago confiscated all firearms in the kingdom. A major crime to carry arms in this country. Detectives line the roofs watching for snipers. Our florists are the artillery here. Every garden in the country supplies the War Office." Her eyes glowed with the shine of sunlight on mountain water. "I depend on you," she breathed, "to report this to every newspaper of the world."

Cold fear melted the muscles around his heart. "It can't work! They'll loot the city, Sire. Enslave you and your people—"

"Wait," she cut him short, "and watch."

He was watching, all right. Sirens were shrilling through the madness below, and there was a mechanical tumult as lorries, tanks and machines were backing against the curbstones. A narrow path opened down the blossom-strewn boulevard. A corps of blue-steel sedans came speeding through the parade lines, snored to a halt

at the palace gates. A van-load of men in canary yellow shirts brought up the rear, and as the sedans squealed to a standstill, the yellow-shirted soldiers tumbled across the pavement to erect a fence of bayonets leading to the palace steps. Officers whipped their bodies to attention. Arms slanted skyward. Keats knew what that bodyguard of Yellow Shirts meant, and swallowed a gulp of expectant fear.

"Hala!" the Helvanians were cheering. "Hala! Greetings!"

A *generalstabsoffizier* sprang from the first car, followed by a Field Marshal and his staff. The sedan doors clanged like the doors of steel safes. Coat skirts swishing, helmets a-glitter with spearheads and eagles, the staff generals hustled up the palace walk, then stood as if uncertain of the next move. One goat-whiskered colonel was scrubbing his forehead with a handkerchief; another pointed to the gallery where the Queen of the Helvanians watched with her ministers, but the others did not look up. Then whistles were shrilling everywhere, officers became images, the doors of the second sedan whanged open and a cordon of Yellow Shirts came rushing through cheering thunder.

But the man hustled in their midst was not under arrest. Nerves tightened under Keats' scalp when he looked down on that spare figure in its severe uniform, khaki breeches and brown cavalry boots, O. D. shirt belted across the breast, the familiar brown necktie, white band on the sleeve with its glaring, squared black Trefoil Cross. "Heil!" the city screamed. "Heil!" But the spare, hatless man ignored the tumult, angrily dusted confetti flakes from his sleeve, and ran quick-step up the palace drive. Keats had a momentary glimpse of that stern-chiseled face with its theatrical swoop of hair across the forehead, ascetic mouth downturned at the corners. August Schnitzler!

Then Yellow Shirts, *generalstabsoffiziers*, Field Marshal, *Der Meister* himself, passed into the palace. The boulevard whirled in kaleidoscopic colors that ached on his eyeballs, and Keats turned on sick legs from

the balcony rail. Somehow Crazy Hooper was on hand with a vest-pocket camera, while the Helvanian ministers were moving off, patting on their tophats, self-conscious as senators after a newsreel pose. The Queen of Helvania came to take his hand.

"Come," was her royal command. "My cabinet and I go to meet him in the Council Chamber. I want you, my Americans, to report this historic meeting to the world."

CHAPTER XII.

ULTIMATUM!

JOHN KEATS had bungled the reporting of one historic conference in his journalistic career, but the minutes of this meeting in the palace of Helvania would remain forever indelible on his mind. Afterwards he could never quite recall how he and Crazy, outlandish in that Balkan setting, arrived there in the Council Chamber to sit like a pair of tramps at an off-side press table under a domed ceiling full of misty light.

On a raised dais before this backdrop sat the Queen of Helvania with her cabinet ministers. Posed in her snowy riding costume behind a pulpit-like black-and-gold desk, her ministers seated glee-club fashion at her back, the little Queen seemed no more than a boy; a small and unafraid tribune confronting the highest delegation from Mars.

They might have come from Mars, the gray-green officers who stamped through the tall doors at room's end. Yellow Shirts and Storm Squads men clanked to guard stations in the outer corridor as the tall doors closed; and a harsh rustling of gray-green overcoats, clacking cavalry boots, the jingle of body harness and sidearms accompanied the spare, hatless man with his backstage haircut up the room.

Seeing a close-up of Schnitzler for the first time, John Keats could almost understand why an enlightened nation could throw aside reason and follow a human as a

god. Nothing in common between this man and the military robots lumped behind him. When Schnitzler struck an attitude the chamber went quiet as stone. His arms were folded in that daguerreotype pose of his photographs, chin lifted exalted as a Caesar's; but his posturing was more than good theatricals.

The Puritanic simplicity of his uniform was a cunning ostentation against the braid and buckles of his generals. Fanaticism burned in those features. Mystery. Super self-belief in every line of that face. Anger was on it now, like a reflection of firelight on cold marble. The eyes appeared glazed, as if coated by a blue-black Chinese enamel. The sensitive, downturned mouth quivered like a girl's. In that attitude of conquering "super man" there was something half poetic, half grotesque, neurotic yet compelling as dynamite. This was a man, yet he could fling an arm at the sky and populations would salaam.

THERE was a minute when, watching Schnitzler, Keats was reminded of a magician whose act had bungled up his sleeve. Garlands for his guns and this calm little ruler in a riding habit! He couldn't have staged it better himself, and maybe she'd stolen his spot. Eye to eye she met the Schnitzler glare. Red color drained down the stern bones of his face, his eyes twinkled black, and his outburst came with the simplicity of fury.

"Madam, what does this carnival of nonsense mean?"

Midway to the dais Schnitzler's staff officers had halted in a sort of confused, watchful silence. The Helvanian ministers made no expression or sound. At the muffled rage in the Dictator's voice, John Keats could have uttered a nervous snicker, but he wanted to yell the same question, himself, to snap that thread of strain.

Queen Roberta stood up behind the high-topped desk with a pleasant smile. "On my part, Herr Schnitzler, I might ask the same of you? But it has always been the custom of Helvania to welcome visiting neighbors. Now that you are here, just

what do you and your people intend to do?"

Visiting neighbors! Intend to do? Suspicious gutturals muttered from the Teuton officers. August Schnitzler stroked the swoop of hair out of his left eye to glare the more directly.

"Her former Majesty," he suggested in a sweetened snarl, "presents a very clever charade, a jest we do not fail to appreciate. Unhappily in the emergency of war, Teutony has no time for jests."

"I do not jest for my people," the Queen answered, her words a shade louder. "The Teutons are here with welcome. You have a million men in my country? Five million? Good. There is room in Helvania for all. Our countryside you have found at your disposal. Already my subjects have quit their homes in a gesture of hospitality toward your good soldiers. You will find quarters available for everybody, as my people are gladly transferring their families to the apartments reserved for this day, apartments built by public funds in this city. Our hospitals, libraries, hotels, farms are open, by my royal order, to all who wish to come."

John Keats heard a chuckle from the lank man at his elbow. But August Schnitzler and John Keats and the Teuton general staff were staring like fools, and only the Queen appeared sane in that aberrant chamber. Even an orator could lose his mind. Schnitzler's mouth jarred open.

"You have voted to abandon your allies? You propose an affiliation with Teutony?" he panted.

"Helvania did not abandon her allies, Herr Schnitzler," her reply was clear and calm, but there was an obvious sting in the "Herr Schnitzler" that a dictator could not fail to resent. "My country made military alliances with no other power. As for an affiliation, what matter the government so long as one's subjects are alive and happy? Let us, you and I, put aside confusing diplomatic speeches, and speak plainly for all to understand. As Queen of the Helvanians, I am responsible for the last man under my sovereignty. I do not

wish my people to fight, to die for me. Life, that is what I wish for them. My subjects have no quarrel with yours. If your rule be just and fair, what matter the capital city? Regard," she threw out a small hand. "Here is my country, here are my subjects. Gladly I give them into your care. Can you heal their business depressions? So much the better. Can you collect the taxes, sell their goods, operate the farms, build the highways, conduct the labor reliefs, handle the Helvanian affairs—what matter the surname of the ruler? Better my subjects be live Teutons than dead Helvanians. The Teutons are a great, a noble race. I trust the heart of your people. Gladly I extend the responsibility of ruling to you. Herr Schnitzler, here is my country, a great country. Take it, and welcome."

WHAT a climax to a war that was! *Here is my country, my friend. If you can run it better than I, take it.* If Schnitzler's face was something to remember, if the faces of the conquering generals were a solid blob of amazement, John Keats would have wanted to see his own visage, right then. The press table was shaking under his elbows. Crazy Hooper was swallowing air with a sound like peanut brittle going down. August Schnitzler's reply sawed through gritted teeth.

"Her former Majesty fails to appreciate her situation. I am forced to remind her that the Kingdom of Helvania is no longer hers to offer up with such subtleties of meekness and good will." Thunder worked the muscles in his throat. "Teutony is not fooled by pious protests of friendship on the part of her beaten enemy. God is a mighty fortress and a sword in the hand of the righteous. It is the word of God that the Pharisees be driven from their temples without favor or mercy. It is His will—"

"Aren't you confusing yourself with the Deity?" the Queen asked in an unruffled tone. "You speak of God as an angel of vengeance, and talk of yourself as His emissary. In the words of Voltaire, I might

ask to see your written credentials. And since we have gone into Biblical quotations, do you remember the commandment, 'Love your enemies'?"

Keats saw a plump staff general nudge an artillery commander with a whispered, "Not difficult if they were all so good looking," and the room tinted crimson against his eyelids. Schnitzler's face had shaded the hue of suffocation.

"Pious mummery!" he thundered. He slung up his arm at a slant. "As *Reichsmeister* of Teutony, I demand the unconditional surrender of the Kingdom of Helvania and the immediate arrest of the commanding general of the Helvanian army!"

QUEEN ROBERTA moved to stand beside her upraised desk. "As commanding general of the Helvanian army, I offer myself to your arrest, Herr Schnitzler. For my people I have spoken. Might I ask on what charges I am to give myself up?"

"Her former Majesty, the Queen of the Helvanians, might be referred to Article Two of our Declaration of War submitted at seven o'clock of this morning."

She nodded. "But in ordinary relations of diplomacy one country serves another with an ultimatum giving a time-limit to answer the charges. My War Office was accused of complicity in an act of war against your High Command, and no chance was offered for discussion through the channels of diplomacy or the League."

Schnitzler offered curtly, "Teutony does not belong to your League. Your ministers had pledged Helvania's neutrality, then instigated a direct attack on a nation at war."

"You have proof of our complicity in Von Reinmar's murder, Herr Dictator?"

"Proof enough!" Schnitzler hurled up an impatient fist. "I, myself, listened to the trial by radio phone. Papers found on the Swiss directly implicated Helvania."

"My War Office denies any hand in this crime. But I, Queen of the Helvanians and commander of their army, freely offer myself to your firing squads as indemnity

for Field Marshal von Reinmar's murder."

"Enough!" Schnitzler shouted. "Teutony refuses to be trapped in a design motivated to turn public opinion against her. Do warriors trade their commanding generals for members of a tottering royalty? The Queen will give immediate orders that her War Office surrender all men, arms, munitions at once to *Feld-Marshal* Gottlieb von Neumann. Cabinet ministers and all government officials to be placed under arrest. Her former Majesty is given twenty-four hours to prepare for exile."

Facing that tumult of commands, the Queen stood in silence; Schnitzler's voice emptied itself into a chambered hush; and the Teutonic generals grouped behind their leader moved uncertainly forward. But there sounded a rattle of metal beyond the tall doors; voices snapped and barked; a Reichswehr officer and three Yellow Shirts broke into the room. Savage staff generals whirled at the intruders, and before the Dictator could go on with his capitulatory demands, he was called into a feverish consultation with his staff. John Keats caught fragments out of the whispered uproar. Things were doing out on the boulevard. A company of Work Troopers had deserted their trucks to dance with Helvanian girls on the square. There'd been a row with the officers who tried to call them into line. A captain trying to arrest an actress had been knocked down by one of his own men. These women were swarming all through the army. Soldiers were singing and drinking.

Reports from outside the city claimed artillerymen were strolling around with girls on their arms. Some Bavarian riflemen had openly thrown down their guns. A company of machine gunners had cheered the Helvanians. A Reichswehr officer was seen fraternizing with citizens in a near-by café. Troopers were heard to say they were sick of killing—

ALREADY stunned where he sat, Keats gaped under the spell of Schnitzler's new fury. The Dictator sprang among his staff officers, bawling, empurpled.

"A plot! A plot to destroy our army's morale. We will stamp out this weakness at once! Put the city under martial law. The Bavarian riflemen to be shot as deserters. Arrest any soldier seen talking with these Helvanian pacifists!"

He spun at a white-skinned aide. "Clear the Helvanians from the streets and lock them in. Tear down all flags, signs, propaganda to hurt our morale. Those images of intellectual decadence that clutter the city, pull them down, do you understand? Sweep them out. Smash them. Wipe out every last sign of this Helvanian propaganda. That public library—burn every last book by nightfall. Indoors with the citizens, do you hear? My men will not be subjected to this scheming false hospitality designed to undermine their efficiency. Any girl or woman seen talking with a soldier goes under arrest. Any Helvanian male citizen caught speaking on common terms with our men is to be shot! Do you hear those terms?" he whirled at the Queen and her ministers. "My army will *not* be undermined by your cunning propagandists."

Hands open at her sides, the Queen gazed evenly into the dark points of the raging man's eyes. For a moment she had no answer, and the room was alive with the sound of breathing. Everything was like a play, and the echo of running cavalry boots that came in when the tall doors swung was like sounds offstage. The lavender face of August Schnitzler could not be real. John Keats could believe none of this.

Only the eyes of the girl on the raised platform seemed true, meeting this Teutonic dictator's glare with a contempt and anger of her own that was pure royalty.

"Are these the laws you would bring my subjects, Herr Schnitzler?"

"You will see them go into effect immediately."

Her white figure moved behind the tall desk; she, too, could stand with folded arms. Unafraid, she gazed at the man before her. "I do not like these laws. I was

afraid of this. In your country the people are the servants of the Law. In Helvania the Law has always been the servant of the people. I said I would gladly turn my subjects over to your government provided it gave them a fair chance to live."

"Do you presume to argue the will of the Teutonic High Command—"

She derided, "We welcome you with open hands and you order my people shot for hospitality. In that light I refuse to surrender my people to your rule; refuse to sacrifice myself for a crime my country did not intrigue. I carry this matter to a higher court; the court of world opinion." Lifting her head fiercely, she swept a wide gesture with an arm. "I warn you, Herr Dictator, anything you say may be used against you. Microphones in this room are now carrying our voices to every corner of the world; my radio engineers have called a worldwide hook-up; I leave the listeners of humanity to judge these proceedings."

PULSES thudding like kettle drums, Keats sped a stare of comprehending admiration at the amazing ruler of the Helvanians. A gusty exclamation escaped Crazy Hooper at his side. But Schnitzler's fist was a dark maul waving at the ceiling frescoes.

"Know that my generals are not caught by this treachery. The radio engineers of my army have been creating static to eliminate the sending power of your secret Helvanian stations."

Pallor came to the Queen's lips, but she countered softly, "So we reveal our true stripes, you and I. Honesty is never afraid of being overheard. I have provided against the eventuality of a secret session with you, however. At our press table sits the representative of a news syndicate, an American citizen, neutral, unprejudiced. I count on this gentleman to report in exact detail each word of this meeting."

"Gosh!" It was the mildest expletive Crazy had ever used.

Breath chugged out of Keats' lungs in a cold gush that seemed to bring his heart up with it; the enameled eyes in Schnitzler's face wrenched toward him, jabbed like electric surgeon's knives that would cut him away.

The Dictator's voice was acid. "I am sure the presence of this alien reporter will not guarantee a press account of Helvania's humiliating surrender."

Above the marble desk the Queen's eyes flashed the color of sun on ice. "Helvania has made no surrender, humiliating or otherwise. Herr Schnitzler, I warn you and your Teuton generals. To avenge the murder of your statesman, Baron von Speer, you have caused the deaths of thousands," her cry rang down the room. "My unarmed populace shall not be pillaged to avenge the death of a general, slain at no instigation of ours. Be warned again! If one single Helvanian is killed by you or your men—"

On this wholly unexpected tone of warning, her voice paused on its note of threat, stunning every hearer in the room; and the consternation that traveled down the room might have been echoed by the commotion outside. Confused sounds, muffled words of command came faintly through the barrier; then, as everyone shifted startled eyes, the door snapped open, whipped shut at a sharp order, and a pair of Teuton officers were there like an interruption. Striding forward swiftly, they advanced toward the paralyzed staff commanders; one tall, slim, purposeful, the other spare and stooped, walking with the swing of a limp.

Something in the carriage of those rigid figures addled the eyeballs in Keats' head. Their gray-green field coats made a militant swish. Hard light glittered on their steel helmets. On stepping through the doors, the first man had whipped a machine gun pistol from his coat to cover the Teuton staff. Stepping sideways, the second man pointed a pair of black automatics at the Helvanian end of the room.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.



IN the leading novelette in this week's ARGOSY, "Soldiers of Misfortune," J. D. Newsom says he has tried to express the point of view of the man who will not and cannot adapt himself to the requirements of the French Foreign Legion.

"I do not pretend to endorse all the opinions expressed by my characters," he goes on to say. "The story is primarily a *story*—fiction. It embodies ideas expressed with crude violence at times, because crudity and violence are a large part of the Legion background; and my experience has been that men whose lives are in danger do not draw fine distinctions between right and wrong.

"On the other hand, I am not ashamed to admit that if I write about war it is because I happen to like peace; because I think that war and the incessant threat of war that hangs over all our heads these days is cruel and inex-

usable among so-called civilized nations.

"Furthermore, I have seen enough of the colonies of important nations, and I have learned enough of the inside history of their growth and exploitation, to despise to the point of nausea all the cant and blather that accompanies these contemptible land-grabs the world over."

CHALLIS ranks with Sabatini:

Bloomfield, N. J.

I am moved to write you by the announcement in the March 30th issue of a new series of George Challis's stories of *Tizzo*, "*The Firebrand*." The last series of these stories by Mr. Challis I consider the most outstanding published in ARGOSY between January 1st and the present. The days of the Italian Renaissance are rich material for any writer, and Mr. Challis has succeeded in transporting his readers into the very heart of this romantic period, when plot was met with counterplot, steel with steel (or perhaps a judicious poisoning), and when a man's ally of today might plot his death on the morrow.

The conception and handling of these stories by Mr. Challis is admirable; his style is arresting;

WHAT is *your* idea of the best story (of any length, from short story to serial) published in ARGOSY since January 1, 1935? For the twelve post cards or letters from readers which, in the opinion of the editors, give the best reasons why this or that story stands out above all others, the magazine will reward the letter-writers with twelve full, yearly subscriptions. We don't want mere praise; we are interested in finding out exactly what stories you like best. Nor do we care about your literary style or skill. If there is some story that you liked so much that it stands out in your memory above all others, that is the story we want you to tell us about. It isn't necessary for you to read every story published in ARGOSY. You will have just as good a chance to win one of those twelve subscriptions if you read six of the stories published as you would if you read them all. But we must know *why* you liked the story you choose as best.

Letters selected by the editors will be published from week to week, *but not all letters published will receive subscriptions.*

Make your comments as long or as short as you wish, for mere length will not be considered. Put down all your reasons, however. Then address your letter to The Editor, ARGOSY Magazine, 280 Broadway, New York City, so that it will reach us not later than August 1st, 1935.

and in *Tizzo* he has created a character who lives and breathes. I have long considered Rafael Sabatini the master of the romantic historical novel; but on the strength of these writings Mr. Challis certainly rates a place in any discussion of authors of this type of story. "*Firebrand*" stories break the monotony of the usual Western, detective, or adventure themes, and they are in keeping with the ARGOSY policy of variety.

HENRY B. GEDDES, JR.

ONLY out of experience—

Scandia, Kan.

I am and have been a reader of ARGOSY for a number of years, and it is hard to say during all that time just which has been the best story. Of course some are better than others, and those stories I liked someone else did not think very much of. But on the whole they are better than the stories printed in most magazines.

I have just finished reading "*Imperial Shadows*," in the April 13th issue, and I must say I think it is the best so far this year. I was with the U. S. Army in France, during the World War. I won't say what branch of the service I was with, but I know that Ared White, the author of "*Imperial Shadows*," must have seen

service in France. He knows how things were there at the time I speak of, for "*Imperial Shadows*" could not have been written except from true experience. I hope to see more of such stories by Mr. White from time to time.

E. H. LEWIS.

ACTION!—Camera!—More action!

Westwood, N. J.

I choose "*The Monster of the Lagoon*." George F. Worts certainly knows his stuff. *Singapore Sammy Shay* has been one of my favorite characters for a long time. I have read a good many stories concerning him. "*The Monster of the Lagoon*" has plenty of action, and if there is anything I buy the ARGOSY for it is action stories. Fantastic and improbable though *Singapore's* actions are, they are never quite impossible. And if there is anything that annoys me it is these so-called "fantastic" (utterly impossible) tales.

Worts tells the story in a very fascinating way; his characters are all realistic. Being a biology enthusiast, I appreciate *Bryce Robbins's* giant amoeba theory more than many other ARGOSY readers may have. Yet the story is perfectly clear and to the point, and it contains no long-winded descriptions.

W. G. CORNELL.

LOOKING AHEAD!

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28x5.25-18	2.90	28x5.25-18	2.90		
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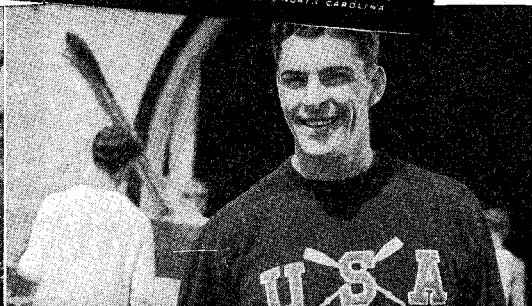
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HEALTHY NERVES! "Any one who spends much time in water sports can't afford to trifle with jumpy nerves," says Harold ("Stubby") Kruger, Olympic swimmer and water polo star. Above, you see "Stubby" in Hollywood — snapped by the color camera. He says, "I smoke a great deal, and Camels don't ever ruffle my nerves."